Fowl Feathered Review
№ 189

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November, 1961.

WITHDRAWAL OF 'DISTAVAL'

Dear Doctor,

We reproduce below the text of a letter which has been sent to medical and pharmaceutical journals published in Australia.

"During the past week The Distillers Company (Biochemicals) Limited London, have received reports from two overseas sources which may associate Thalidomide with harmful effects on the foetus in early pregnancy.

Although the evidence on which these reports are based is circumstantial (there have been no reports arising in Great Britain, either chemically or pharmacologically) The Distillers Company (Biochemicals) Limited feel that, pending further investigation, they have no alternative but to withdraw 'Distaval' from the market. They are also withdrawing other products which contain Thalidomide, namely 'Valgis', 'Tensival' and 'Valgraine'. Meanwhile, they are continuing to carry on pharmacological and other studies of their own, to make every endeavour to learn the truth about this development

As a result of this decision, 'Distaval' and other products Thalidomide are now being withdrawn from sale in Australia and New

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faithfully,

Issue № 189: The Dialectics of Doo-Wop: Post-Structuralist Interpretations of Interplanetary Harmony / The accordion plays, and the moon weeps pickled herring

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition—an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart—it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."

--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

Return Policy:
If this magazine does not meet your expectations, please return it to us in its original condition for a full refund, minus the cost of enlightenment.

Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded)
To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

1. **Craft** (or **Culinary Construct**): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. **The Gatekeeper:** Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, "China Wok Habitue," suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it's more likely a testament to the local takeout joint's generous portions. (**Please note:** Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. **Format:** Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (**Pro-tip:** The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. **The Cycle Continues:** We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. **The Sandwiches:** Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. **Leap Year Follies:** Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid

A Prefatory Note on the Collated Sources for the Kathmandu Excursion of Speezed and the Giggle Dribbles

The ensuing narrative, which chronicles the aesthetic-archival pilgrimage undertaken by the Ogunquit-based maternal musical aggregate known colloquially as 'Speezed and the Giggle Dribbles,' has been painstakingly reconstructed from a bewildering farrago of primary, secondary, and frankly conjectural documents. Each source, many of them fragmentary and stained with substances best left un-analyzed, has been assigned an initial for the sake of a spurious academic clarity.

The following are the principal codices consulted:
Og. from Ogunquit, Maine. This Ur-text, consisting of notes scrawled in gel pen on the back of a slightly greasy paper bag from 'The Salty Clam Shack,' was generously provided by the proprietor, who discovered it wedged in the passenger-side door of a 2018 Honda Odyssey. It contains the foundational mission statement, though several key directives are obscured by what appears to be a large tartar sauce smudge.

Ktm.[1] from Kathmandu. A second-hand account, transcribed from the garbled recollections of a trekking-gear outfitter in Thamel who claims to have sold the subjects 'yak-butter-proof socks.' The text is riddled with misinterpretations, confusing the band's search for 'marginalia' with a request for 'magical marijuana.' It is, therefore, of limited utility but immense anthropological interest.

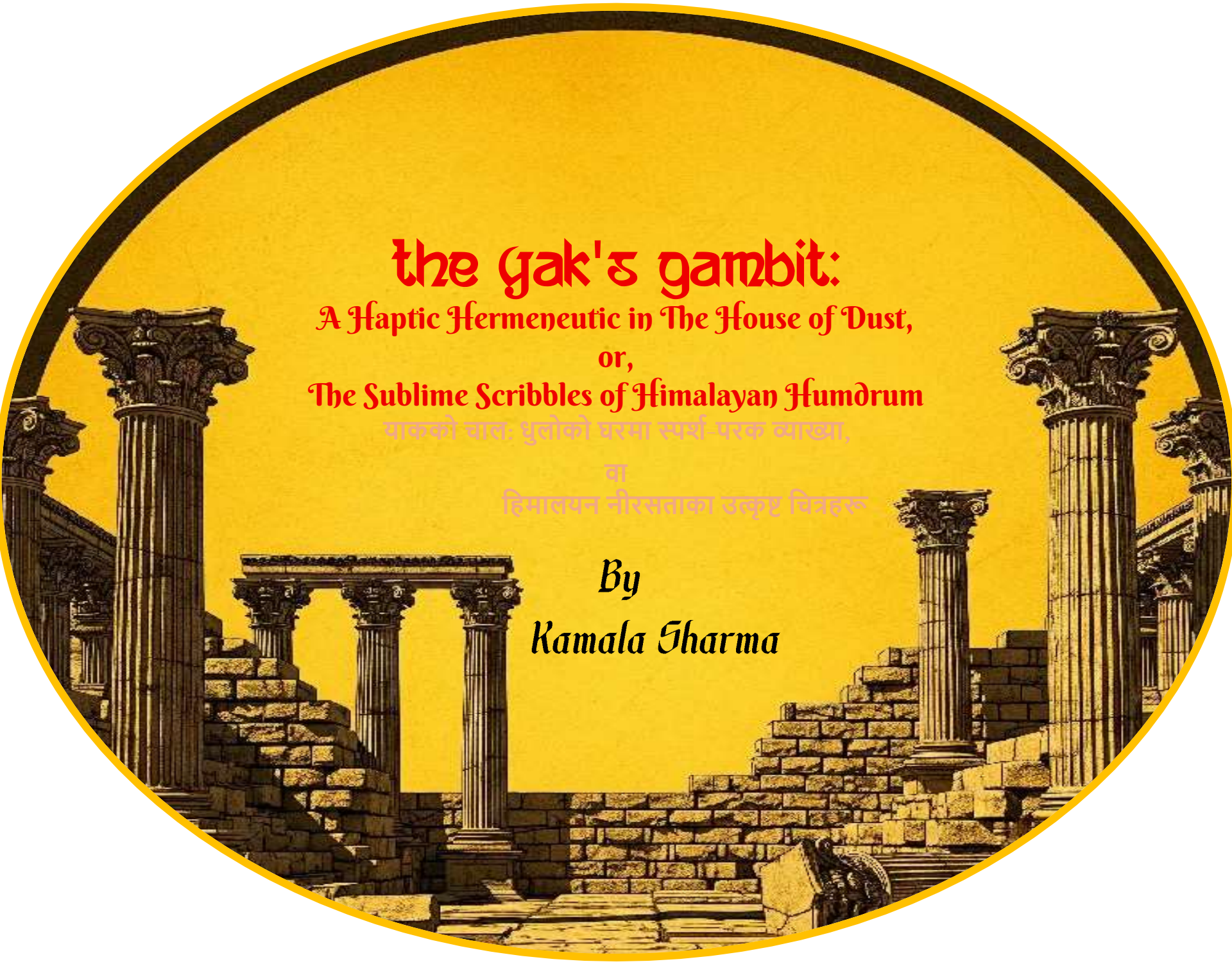
Bos. from the archives of the Brookline, MA, Public Library. This is not a direct account but rather a tangential reference found within a noise complaint filed by a neighbor during the band's pre-tour rehearsal. Catalogued under 'Suburban Disturbances, Sonic,' it offers a unique, if hostile, analysis of the band's percussive techniques, referred to herein as 'a relentless fusillade against God's own silence.'

N.L.N.? Another, highly suspect, copy believed to originate from the National Library of Nepal itself. This document is a single, smudged photocopy of a temporary visitor's

pass, on the reverse of which is a hastily written list. The scribe, evidently a local guide attempting to capture the band's esoteric requests, frequently substitutes Nepali concepts for their approximate English sonic cognates; thus 'doodle' is rendered as 'dharma,' 'bookmark' becomes 'Brahma,' and the search for 'album art' is noted as a desire to locate 'the soul's true cart.' It is incomplete and smells faintly of incense and defeat.

M.V. from the Minivan. A travelogue maintained in a spiral-bound notebook, discovered under a floor mat. It consists of ninety-seven entries, though with significant lacunae, particularly in sections detailing the consumption of service-station snacks. The prose style varies wildly, suggesting multiple authors whose primary concerns oscillate between achieving spiritual transcendence and locating a public restroom.
[?] an unlabelled fragment found tucked inside a copy of *Eat, Pray, Love* at a hostel book-exchange. It appears to be a single lyric, written on a cocktail napkin: "The void smells like mothballs / The mothballs smell like time / My dharma is a doodle / Of a yak committing crime." This is widely considered the Rosetta Stone of the entire expedition.

The afore-mentioned story shall begin on the next page



the Yak's gambit:

A Haptic Hermeneutic in The House of Dust,
or,
The Sublime Scribbles of Himalayan Humdrum

याकको चाल: धुलोको घरमा स्पर्श-परक व्याख्या,

वा

हिमालयन नीरसताका उत्कृष्ट चित्रहरू

By

Kamala Sharma

Episode the First: A Haptic Hermeneutic in the House of Dust

The air in the National Library of Nepal, located in Patan, was not merely air. It was a physical substance, a dense, scholarly broth of desiccated paper, languid dust motes performing a slow-motion ballet in the buttery shafts of high-window sun, and the faint, almost Proustian ghost of a thousand spilled teas. It was a silence so profound you could hear your own intentions forming.

"Right," Barb whispered, her voice a conspiratorial rasp that nonetheless ricocheted off the vaulted ceiling. She was the band's lyricist, a pseudo-intellectual who treated a trip to the supermarket as a fraught exercise in post-structuralist ethnography. "The mission, as we've established, is not bibliophilic in the traditional sense. We are not here to read. We are here to perform a psychogeographical excavation of the textual object. To commune with the spectral residue of previous consciousnesses."
Trish, the bassist and the group's silent, observing anchor, stood by a tall shelf, her fingers tracing the cracked leather spine of a Sanskrit grammar. A single, objective thought formed in her mind: *The spine feels like jerky. The light is the colour of weak chamomile. Barb has been using the word 'spectral' every seven minutes since we landed.*

Cheryl, the drummer and the band's Enthusiastic Idiot, vibrated with readiness. Her approach to the world was one of joyous, unthinking collision. "Got it. Spectral residue. So, I just... hit them?"

"No!" Barb hissed, horrified. "God, no. This is a **haptic hermeneutic**, Cheryl. Haptic. From the Greek *haptikos*—able to touch. We are seeking the aura, the palimpsest of forgotten scribbles, the psychic thumbprint. We must **feel** the books. Smell them. Listen to them."

Cheryl's face lit up with the pure, uncomplicated bliss of having been given a stupid, tangible task. "Okay! Listening to books! I can do that!"
She marched to the nearest shelf, selected a hefty tome bound in faded burgundy, and held it to her ear like a conch shell. She closed her eyes in deep concentration. "Getting...

getting something," she murmured. "It's like... the ocean, but drier. And with more footnotes."

Barb nodded, a Flaubertian sense of satisfaction settling upon her. The folly was proceeding exactly as she'd envisioned. "Excellent. Now, the olfaction-based analysis. What are its scent-notes?"

Cheryl lowered the book and gave it a delicate sniff, then a deep, sommelier-like inhalation that sucked a small cloud of dust into her nostrils, causing her to sneeze with the force of a dropped kick drum. The explosion, a wet KERSHAAAA! in the monastic quiet, made a nearby scholar physically leap from his chair.

Trish observed: *The sneeze was a percussive event. The scholar, a man with a tweed jacket and a look of profound academic torment, now has a fine mist of Cheryl's enthusiasm on his spectacles.*
Undeterred, Cheryl wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Okay. Top note of... disappointment," she declared, her voice now thick with congestion. "A mid-palette of... well, it's a little fusty, Barb. Like a wizard's attic. And a base note of... existential loneliness and... maybe a hint of long-dead yak?"

"The yak!" Barb's eyes widened. "The yak is the key! The ur-beast of the Himalayan consciousness! That book is hot, Cheryl. That's a potential album cover. Put it in the 'maybe' pile."

The 'maybe' pile was the floor.

For the next hour, the scene devolved into a masterclass of performative absurdity. Barb strode between shelves, pontificating in a stream-of-consciousness patter that was equal parts Lord Buckley and a misremembered self-help podcast. "Dig it, these cats were scribbling with the real cosmic ink, man. Every little smudge is a blues note from the soul-train to Nirvana, you just gotta be hip to the jive..."
Cheryl, now fully committed, was developing a system. She would tap each book with a knuckle. A dull *thud* meant 'no vibes.' A slightly more resonant *thock* meant 'latent

creative energy.' She held one book up to the light, not to read it, but as if trying to x-ray its spiritual contents.

Trish simply watched, a chronicler of the chaos. *The light has shifted. It is now the colour of honey. Cheryl is gently rocking a copy of the Pañcharakshā Sutras as if it were a sick baby. Barb is attempting to meditate cross-legged in the aisle, but the strap of her fanny pack is digging into her thigh.*

The end came not with a bang, but with a quiet cough. A librarian, a small, elegant woman with a serene face that had witnessed every possible permutation of human foolishness, appeared beside them.
"May I be of assistance?" she asked, her English precise and calm.

Barb scrambled to her feet. "Ah! Yes! We are... engaged in a deep semiotic inquiry," she announced, dusting off her jeans. "We are seeking the... unofficial narrative. The sub-textual hieroglyphs. The doodles."

The librarian blinked. "The doodles?"

"The little drawings," Cheryl clarified, helpfully. "In the margins. Of, like, sad-looking goats. Or geometric shapes. For our band."

A slow smile spread across the librarian's face. It was not a smile of mockery, but of pure, unadulterated delight. She had seen it all, but she had not seen this.

"You mean," she said, her voice laced with a gentle, crystalline amusement, "you are looking for the **marginalia**?"

Barb froze. The perfect, academic word she had been circling for weeks, delivered with effortless grace. "...Yes," she managed.

The librarian gestured for them to follow. She led them to a small, climate-controlled room. "We have several codices famous for their extensive marginalia. The scribes were

often quite bored. This one," she said, presenting a beautiful, illuminated manuscript, "is known for its annotations. A 14th-century monk appears to have been calculating his family's gambling debts in the margins of a sacred text."

She turned a page carefully. And there it was. In the empty space beside a block of intricate Nepal Bhasa script was a tiny, exquisitely rendered drawing of a yak wearing a hat. It looked thoroughly fed up.

Cheryl gasped. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Barb was speechless, her entire complex theoretical framework collapsing into a puff of smoke.

Trish looked from the grumpy, hatted yak to her bandmates' ecstatic faces. A new thought formed, clear and objective as the Patan light: *This is it. This is the album cover. This is the whole point.* And for the first time that day, she smiled. The sweetness of their shared, ridiculous victory was more profound than any spectral residue.

Dust, Shoes, and Silent Tears

By Nick Pearson

Dad looked like a ruined banker in a 19th-century allegorical painting. He was a resolute but destroyed man standing in a suit, a paper bearing bad news held tight in one hand. Only, Dad didn't manage a bank. He owned and operated—quite badly—a corner store called Veazie Agricultural and Aquatic Mercantile, which had been passed on from son to son since 1897. It was a total throwback. Old calendars, a cardboard display of out-of-date Aerial sunglasses, corn cob pipes, Kodak film ads—who buys film? —dusty wooden floors that hadn't been waxed since the Wilson administration, and an ornate manual register only Dad knew how to operate. It was all just sad. The icing on the cake was the eighty-seven pairs of nurses' work shoes in sizes 6 wide to 8 that he'd picked up at an auction. Beige vinyl. Yellow laces. Dead stock in their original shoeboxes circa 1979. They were stacked in the aisles like rubble from an earthquake. He had a deal: Buy your groceries at his store and he'd throw in a pair for free. That was Mom's idea. Nobody bought their groceries there. Just scratch-and-win tickets, cheap rotgut smokes, slushies, and fishing bait. That's it.

Dad had me scour the internet to buy an analog-to-digital converter—or was it the other way around? —for his 1984 Zenith family console TV he insisted on keeping. He'd sit with his back to the door in aisle three watching *Jeopardy*, soaps, and a DVD copy of a YouTube mockumentary called *The Bob Emergency: a study of athletes named Bob, Part I*. The premise: "More than 10,000 people named Bob have entered the world of sports. Today, there are only nine. Bobs are special people, and in losing them to retirement, we stand to lose more than we might imagine." He'd sigh and look over his shoulder and mutter, "Kids these days."

Dad had a little brother—little in the literal sense. Uncle Josh. Uncle Josh was, in fact, six years older than Dad. He stood at 18.5 inches tall, was proportionate to his height, and sported a fiery red beard and a newsboy hat. He read encyclopedias he'd bought at yard

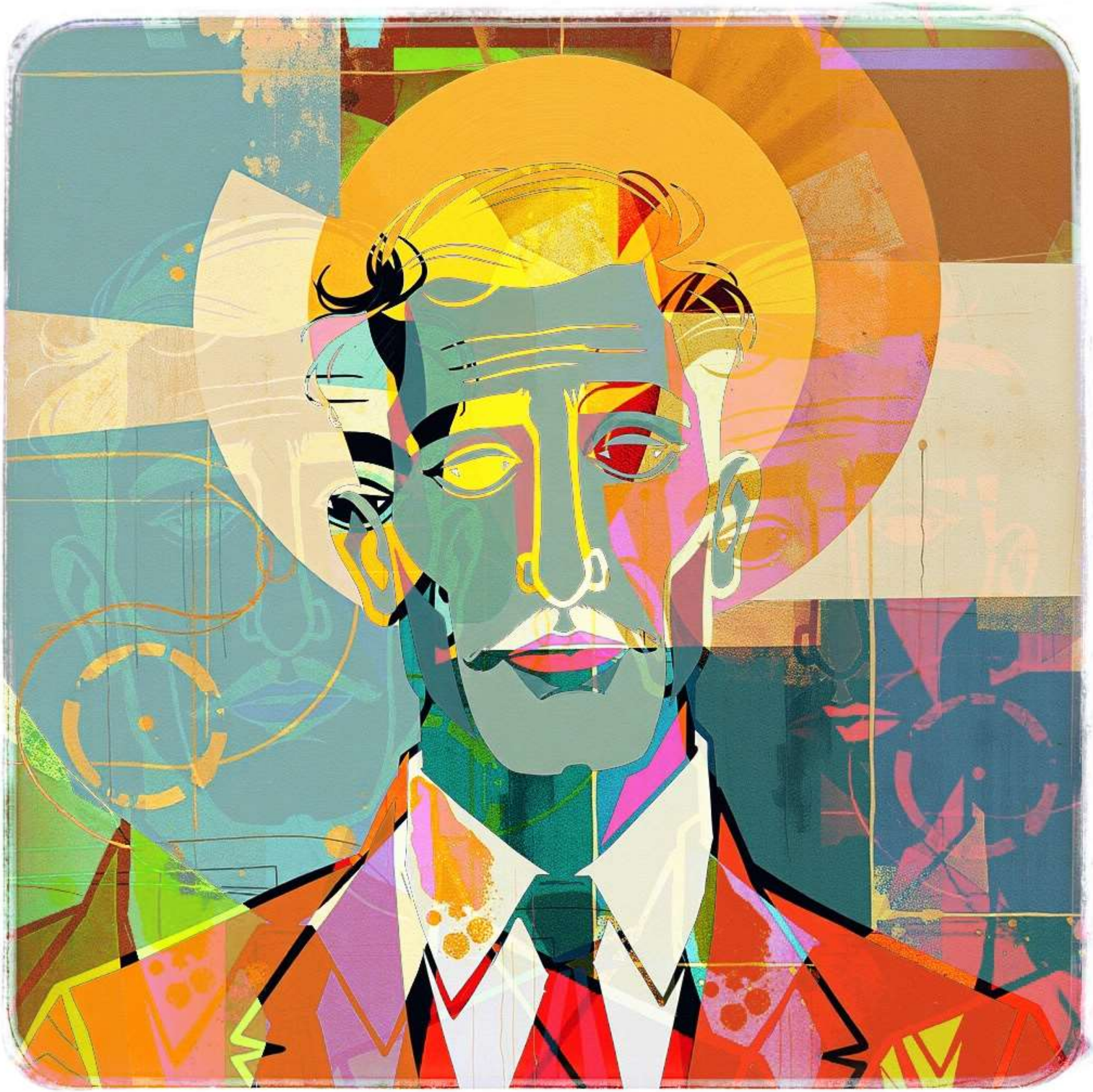
sales and marked them with fake twenties customers had tried to pass off as the real thing. If Dad and Mom, who were not talkers, were invited to supper at a friend's house, they brought Uncle Josh so the host could quiz him on anything, and he'd know the facts immediately. It took the spotlight off my parents, and they got a kick out of people feeling in awe of this tiny wizard who knew everything: the Panama Canal, the world's longest truck, leap years, Roman Imperial Civilization. He knew it all. They usually presented a gift to the hosts: a weird flashlight, of which Dad had two hundred and thirty-seven. It was a red box that held four C batteries. Attached to it was a swiveling lamp with an incandescent light bulb connected to the battery box with three feet of insulated cable. It was like a mood light for coal mining hipsters.

One day my father decided he was closing the store for good. He was going to chase tornadoes with Uncle Josh across the globe for eighty days and make a video that would earn them a fortune. It was in my freshman year at high school that they pulled me into this. I was the cameraman. They gave me a cheap camcorder from Amazon and a book called *Filmmaking for Dummies* and told me to get as close a view of each tornado as possible. Trying to hold that camcorder steady while the wind whipped around us was a nightmare. The lens would fog, the camera would shake, and keeping the tornado in frame felt impossible, especially when we were really close. I guess I got my mother's genes; all I wanted was to take my girlfriend to the arcade in Bangor after school, not chase notoriety.

Mom was devastated. She went to stay with her mother in Arkansas while we chased tornadoes in Texas, specifically around the panhandle near Amarillo; Iowa, where we filmed a massive twister tearing through open fields outside of Des Moines; and Kansas, getting some incredibly close footage of a rope tornado touching down near Wichita.
Our global chase took an unexpected turn when we found ourselves in Spain, outside of Seville. We spotted a rare tornado forming in the distance, a surprisingly narrow funnel cloud against the Spanish sky. We tried to convince a taxi driver to drive fast and follow it, but he was not impressed by our enthusiasm for extreme weather. The driver got ticketed, and we, two Americans and a tiny, bearded man in a newsboy cap, were instructed to leave the country in 48 hours.

When we got back, Dad had to bring Mom a box of whoopie pies from Frank's in Bangor—the best on earth and beg her in front of his mother-in-law to come back. But Mom didn't let him off the hook so easily. My older cousin from Bucksport drove his dump truck down to the store, and guess what landed in it? All eighty-seven pairs of nurses' shoes and all two hundred and thirty-seven boxes of tricky lights. Dad wept. Silent tears. But he was glad Mom was back.

She and I waxed the floors after sweeping and vacuuming. I put the dust bunnies from the dustpan and the vacuum cleaner in an old oil drum out back, and the fire was quite strong. The detritus of over a hundred years of wheeling and dealing, customer disinterest, and patriarchal duty disappeared, just like that. I felt I was part of something larger than myself and curiously free, like the fire was telling me to do my own big thing that made sense to me somehow. Dad opened the shop again, muttered about kids and watched TV, and he even stopped wearing a necktie. Uncle Josh read about the Panama Canal, and I went on to be an average freshman in high school. I was used to all the eccentric tics of my family, but honestly, I would have closed that store in a New York minute.



FIVE AND DIME NIGHTMARE: THE PINEAPPLE PHANTASM'S LAST DANCE

By Jake Healy

It was a Tuesday. Most Tuesdays are. The kind of Tuesday that stretches out like a forgotten rubber band in a dusty junk drawer, neither snapping with excitement nor collapsing with despair, just... *existing*. And existing, as Finbar Mannix, a man whose ancestral roots, he'd occasionally mused, twisted back to the ancient Gaelic *Ó Mainchín*, somewhere in the mists of old Munster, could tell you, was his specialty. Beige was his spiritual hue, a muted symphony of *meh*. Until this particular Tuesday.

This Tuesday, you see, decided to throw a glitter bomb into Finbar's perfectly unadorned existence. He was meandering down an alley – not an alley of nefarious

deeds, mind you, but more of a cul-de-sac of discarded cardboard and dreams that had clearly missed their bus. And there it was. Not a damsel in distress, not a briefcase full of unmarked bills, but a **gold glitter-covered plastic pineapple.**
Now, Finbar wasn't one for tropical excursions, not even of the plastic variety. His idea of exotic was a particularly daring shade of grey paint. But this pineapple... it sat there like some flamboyant, exiled monarch of the five-and-dime, catching the dismal light with a thousand audacious winks. It practically *shouted* "Hello, world! I'm here to put the 'art' in 'plastic artifice!'" It possessed a gaudy, defiant cheerfulness that was frankly disorienting in its squalor. Finbar, whose curiosity usually peaked at the crossword puzzle's more perplexing clues, bent down. He picked it up. And the glitter, oh, the glitter! It clung to his fingers like golden pollen, or perhaps, the insidious first flakes of a very peculiar curse.

That night, the pineapple took up residence on his nightstand, an unholy idol bathed in the anemic glow of his bedside lamp. Finbar felt... *different.* It wasn't the kind of different you get from a new haircut, or even a daring new blend of instant coffee. No, this was a subtle shift, a creeping effervescence. His skin, under the faint light, seemed to shimmer, catching the meager photons in ways it never had before. A peculiar buoyancy settled in his chest, a saccharine optimism usually reserved for the wildly improbable testimonials of infomercials or the joyous discovery of a particularly lucrative discount coupon. When he peered at his reflection in the darkened window, it wasn't the usual tired, grey visage staring back. Oh no, this was a face that hummed with a faint, golden aura, like a low-wattage neon sign advertising tropical delirium. He dreamt that night. Not of spreadsheets or overdue utility bills, but of swaying palm trees, of sun-drenched beaches where the sand was made of glitter, and a persistent, low-frequency hum that vibrated through his very bones, a sort of cosmic tuning fork. He awoke to find his sensible cotton pajamas inexplicably adorned with stray gold glitter. It was, he had to admit, a Tuesday unlike any other.

The Chromatic Contagion

From that Tuesday forward, Finbar Mannix was no longer merely Finbar Mannix. He was, if you'll permit the phrasing, Finbar Mannix, *featuring* the plastic pineapple. He was a man infused with the **hue, reflection, and values** of that ludicrous fruit. His wardrobe, once a testament to the virtues of invisibility, performed a dazzling, albeit cheap, sartorial pirouette, shifting from sensible greys to vibrant, almost painfully garish yellows and oranges. His apartment, once a monument to beige, blossomed with cheap, glitter-infused decor. It was as if a discount Mardi Gras parade had exploded within its confines. Every surface, every knick-knack, seemed to catch and refract light with an unsettling intensity, like a disco ball having a nervous breakdown.

His conversations, once limited to the precise meteorological conditions or the fluctuating price of canned peas, became strangely effusive, punctuated by unsolicited opinions on the existential merits of artificial fragrances and the profound structural integrity of mass-produced injection-molded plastic. "You dig it, man," he'd rhapsodize to startled cashiers, his eyes gleaming with an almost manic intensity, like a con man trying to peddle perpetual motion machines, "the *beauty*, cats and kittens, is in the replication, the democratization of *desire*! Every humble abode, a tiny, glittering paradise, a little bit of the Big Rock Candy Mountain, right there on your coffee table!"

Internal Monologue 1 (The Crumb of Consciousness)

A cough. Was that my cough, or the pineapple's? The air, thick with unspoken truths and yesterday's lint, suddenly tasted of ersatz coconut. Memory, a slippery eel, squirmed away from the precise moment of my undoing. Was it the moment the glitter touched my thumb? Or perhaps, the precise instant the cashier at the Dollar Depot said, "Have a nice day," and I felt a faint, golden shimmer ripple through my sensible

socks? Oh, the insidious nature of the commonplace! A Madeleine, yes, but steeped in formaldehyde and tasting faintly of cheap plastic. My self, it slips. Like butter on a hot skillet. No, like a well-oiled comedian, telling jokes only I can hear. The laugh track, where is the laugh track? It's just the hum, the hum of glorious, glittering nothing.

His mind, once a quiet, orderly filing cabinet stuffed with mundane data, was now a swirling vortex of shimmering, synthetic joy. It felt as though a thousand tiny, sequined tap dancers had taken up residence in his frontal lobe, constantly performing a chaotic, glittering ballet. He felt an urge, primal and undeniably *un*-Finbar-like, to spread the gospel of the glitter. His reflection in the mirror was no longer his own, but a distorted, shimmering approximation, a man made of gold dust and hollow plastic, smiling a wide, unblinking smile. A nagging suspicion began to gnaw at the edges of his consciousness, like a tiny, glitter-encrusted termite: his core identity was being hollowed out, replaced by a cheap, glittering imitation. He was becoming the pineapple. Or perhaps, and this was the truly disquieting thought, the pineapple was becoming *him*. It was a thought that made him want to lie down and have a good, long, sensible beige nap. But the pineapple just kept on shimmering.

The Design Acolyte and the Dollar Dragon

The pineapple, now a permanent fixture on Finbar's person, clutched like a bizarre, bejeweled scepter, hummed with a new directive: **Find the Origin.** It was a command that vibrated directly into his very being, bypassing his rational thought processes like a hot knife through butter. He felt the invisible threads of a global supply chain pulling him, a shimmering golden cord stretching across continents, a silken lasso flung by the gods of cheap consumer goods. His quest, fueled by the pineapple's insidious influence, was to locate the fabled designer of this dollar-store artifact in

China. Because, let's face it, nothing that aggressively plastic and aggressively golden starts in Des Moines.

His journey began, as all truly bizarre odysseys must, with an email. A bizarre, glitter-laden missive, mind you, sent to every "dollar store import" contact he could find online, a digital message in a very shiny bottle. Replies trickled in, initially confused ("Is this a prank, sir?"), then increasingly intrigued by his single-minded obsession. It was like Finbar had stumbled into a secret society, the Illuminati of inexpensive ornamentation. He found himself drawn into a global discussion, a swirling vortex of emails that read like avant-garde poetry, face-to-face meetings in sterile conference rooms where the air conditioning hummed a tune of corporate indifference, and whispered conversations in the pulsating, cacophonous heart of bustling factories. The pineapple on his arm, a constant companion and tyrannical muse, seemed to throb, resonating with the raw energy of this strange pilgrimage. It was, Finbar reflected, like trying to find the guy who invented the rubber chicken, only the rubber chicken was trying to make him its emperor.

Internal Monologue 2 (The Shifting Scrim of Self)

The email. Such an ordinary vehicle for such an extraordinary compulsion. My fingers, now faintly iridescent, danced across the keyboard like jitterbugging fleas. Each reply, a tiny, glittering cog in the vast, indifferent machine of commerce. The conference rooms! Sterile as a surgeon's conscience, yet pulsating with the unspoken avarice, the silent screaming of profit margins. And the air conditioning, a symphony of white noise, drowning out the faint, persistent whisper of my own shrinking soul. Was that me, speaking in tongues of market share? Or was it the pineapple, a tiny, golden ventriloquist, pulling my strings? This journey, it's a grand folly, a cosmic vaudeville act where the straight man doesn't even know he's the punchline. The

memory of my grey suits, now a quaint, sepia-toned photograph in a discarded album. Who was that man? He seems so distant, like a forgotten melody from a cracked 78. Ah, the indignity of it all! To be a puppet, and for the puppeteer to be a piece of novelty fruit!

He learned of the "Dragon's Tooth" factory, a monolithic structure in Shenzhen that loomed like a concrete beast exhaling the scent of hot plastic and overworked machinery. It was infamous, he'd learned, for its astonishing output and, shall we say, *enthusiastic* working conditions. He arrived, a man utterly out of time and place, still shimmering faintly under the fluorescent factory lights. He finally found him: Old Man Li, his face a roadmap of wrinkles etched by decades of diligence, his hands stained with the indelible pigments of mass production. This was the accidental architect of Finbar's gilded torment, the unwitting maestro of his chromatic curse.

Li was not what Finbar expected. No flamboyant showman, no mad scientist of plastics. He was quiet, almost stoic, living in a modest apartment above a noodle shop, a tiny oasis of humanity in the industrial sprawl. The pineapple on Finbar's arm, usually a buzzing fount of golden imperatives, vibrated with a furious, almost frantic intensity in Li's quiet, unassuming presence. It was like a nervous dog finally meeting its creator.

The Feast of Frugality and the Fibers of Fate

Old Man Li, a man of quiet dignity, invited Finbar into his cramped apartment. It was a space filled with the gentle, rhythmic whir of an ancient fan and the comforting scent of jasmine tea, a stark contrast to the cacophony of the factory floor. Finbar, still under the pineapple's shimmering spell, felt himself stepping into a different world, a pocket of serene domesticity that felt light-years away from the plastic glitter storm he carried

within him. He sat at a low table, eating a simple meal of rice, vegetables, and a thin broth, prepared with quiet grace by Li' s wife. The food was humble, utterly without pretense, yet each bite was imbued with a warmth, a sense of genuine nourishment, that Finbar hadn't felt in years. And here's the kicker: the pineapple, usually a relentless, shimmering taskmaster, surprisingly, remained silent. Its golden hum had faded to a mere whisper.

Internal Monologue 3 (The Echo of the Everyday)

Rice. Simple, humble rice. Not shimmering. Not plastic. Just... rice. The warmth spread through me, a feeling so foreign, so deeply un-pineapplish. The broth, a subtle counterpoint to the insistent brassiness of my current existence. And Li's wife, her hands moving with the grace of a forgotten art form, preparing sustenance, not spectacle. The pineapple is quiet. It's almost... embarrassed. Does it feel the quiet dignity of a life lived without the relentless pursuit of superficiality? Does it feel the shame of its cheapness in the face of genuine humanity? Good golly, Miss Molly, this is a real head-scratcher! My very essence, once a beige whisper, now a glitter-drenched shout. But here, in this humble room, the shout shrinks to a whimper. Is this salvation? Or merely a brief interlude before the next brass band solo of manufactured desire? Oh, for a good, solid, non-glittering nap!

As they ate, Li spoke, his voice raspy with age and the fine dust of a thousand factories. He spoke of the **global economy**, not as some abstract economic theory, but as a living, breathing, swirling beast that demanded endless novelty at impossible prices. He spoke of designing "trinkets for the masses," of chasing fleeting trends like a dog chasing its tail, of the relentless pressure to innovate while simultaneously cutting corners so sharp they could draw blood. He spoke of *the* pineapple, that particular pineapple, as a hurried design, a last-minute scramble to meet a quota, an

afterthought, a throwaway concept that had somehow, improbably, taken on a life of its own.

"It was meant to be... cheap joy," Li said, gesturing with a calloused hand that bore the marks of honest labor, not digital design. "A small spark in a drab life. A little something to make a kid smile. But the desire... the wanting... it consumes." He sighed, a soft, weary sound. "Like a hungry ghost, it takes more than it gives."

Finbar looked at the pineapple on his arm. It was still glittering, yes, but its luminescence seemed dimmer, its hum less insistent, like a fading radio signal. He looked at Li, this quiet man, this unwitting artisan who had, in his humble efforts, accidentally set Finbar's world ablaze. The allegory, suddenly, became as clear as a perfectly polished plastic gem: the glittering, cheap allure of consumerism, the manufactured joy that promises much but but delivers only hollow echoes, a superficial sheen over an aching void. The pineapple, a symbol of mass-produced fantasy, had latched onto Finbar, not merely to possess him, but to turn him into a living, breathing, shimmering embodiment of its artificial gleam.

Finbar understood now. The pineapple hadn't just taken over his mind; it had dragged him through the looking glass, showing him the raw, pulsating heart of a globalized desire, a desire born in sterile boardrooms and hammered out in noisy factories, a desire that could consume souls as easily as it consumed resources. The story of the world, Finbar realized, was not just about grand narratives of nations and kings, but about the insidious, glittering tendrils of a cheap plastic pineapple, and the ordinary folks caught in its strange, shimmering web. It was, he had to admit, a far more interesting Tuesday than he'd ever anticipated.

Will Finbar ever escape the chromatic curse of the kitsch king, or is he forever destined to reflect its shimmering, shallow glory?

P11
Leo Adler

Third Avenue Elevated

By Leo Adler

The rumble, that particular shudder,
coming before the train itself,
vibrating up through the soles of my sneakers
even before I saw the grimy, riveted beast
lurching into view, sparks sometimes
flying from the third rail, a brief, bright
flash against the perpetual twilight
underneath.
We'd climb those steep, open stairs,
the wood worn smooth by a million footsteps,
the air thick with the smell of exhaust,
something metallic and hot,
and the faint, sweet scent of popcorn
from the street vendors below.
Then the rush of wind as it pulled in,
doors hissing open with a sigh.
Inside, the seats were hard,
sometimes splintered wood, sometimes
a sort of fake leather, patched with tape.
The windows, oh, those windows! Streaked
with grime, but offering
the best show in the city.
Looking down on the rooftops,
the clotheslines strung between tenements,
the geometry of fire escapes,
the private dramas glimpsed
through uncurtained windows.
I remember the shadows it cast,

those massive, moving shadows
that danced across the streets,
briefly eclipsing the sun.
And the sound, always the sound,
a shriek and a groan and a clatter
that could drown out any conversation,
a constant companion to childhood journeys.
It's gone now, of course.
Just a ghost in the collective memory
of New York. Steel pulled down,
the sky opened up,
the rumble silenced.
And I've traveled,
seen the bullet trains of Japan,
the underground tubes of London,
the sleek, silent subways
of places I never dreamed I'd go
when I was just a kid
on that rattling, roaring monster.
But a part of me, I swear,
a small, unrecoverable piece,
got left behind.
Maybe tucked under a seat,
or caught in the grimy mechanism
of a window that wouldn't quite open,
on one of those Third Avenue El cars.
Just a kid, looking out,
thinking the whole world
was right there,
rumbling past.

KÁJA

The Croaking of Kája and the Quest for Salt: A Nouveau Roman Surreal Fusion

By Silvia Yevdokim

Forewarned Is Forearmed and Wouldn't THAT Be Handy! This Being a FOREWORD to the following STORY which naturally you'll skip.

By Ted Shills

BEHOLD! The time has come, ladies and gentlemen, to peel back the layers—the grimy, the glittering, the positively perplexing layers!—of a literary discovery that, by gum, ought to send a shiver of delicious, intellectual frisson down the spine of every bona fide bibliophile and every self-respecting scholar of the post-post-modern condition! For what we present here, freshly dusted off from the metaphorical (and perhaps literal, who can say with these things?!) cobwebs of a vanished life, is nothing less than the FINAL, DAZZLING, ABSOLUTELY UNSETTLING MASTERWORK of a mind that burned with a fierce, almost incandescent flame—the late, lamented, and oh-so-tragically unexpectedly departed Silvia Yevdokim!

Yes, Yevdokim! The name, perhaps, whispers only to the connoisseurs of the truly avant-garde, the cognoscenti who seek out the jagged edges of narrative, the ones who crave a literary landscape sculpted from the very unreliability of existence itself! For years, her

whispers circulated through the rarefied air of Prague's intellectual cafés, tales of a recluse, a visionary, a woman who saw the grand opera of absurdity playing out in the smallest, most insignificant of human transactions. And then—BOOM!—2013, a Prague apartment, a silence, and the hushed, almost conspiratorial murmur: she was GONE! Vanished like Das Mädchen herself, leaving behind only the profound lacuna of her genius!

And what did she leave, you ask, this enigmatic titan of the Nouveau Roman? Not, pish-posh, some tidy, well-bound tome ready for the presses! Oh no, dear reader, for that would have been far too convenient, far too orderly for a mind that reveled in the chaotic, the liminal, the utterly unstable! Instead, what was unearthed from dusty boxes—discovered, so the legend goes, by a solitary literary sleuth whose own anxieties mirrored the very themes of Yevdokim's texts, a man with the weary countenance of a forgotten Enlightenment philosopher and the sartorial flair of a particularly unkempt jazz musician!—were not one, not two, but FOUR distinct manifestations of this very narrative: "The Croaking of Kája and the Quest for Salt"! The final, gloriously unsettling form you hold in your hands, yes, but also three previous drafts! Three! Each a swirling vortex of excised observations, shifted paragraphs, and linguistic stratagems, a veritable archeological dig into the very process of narrative disintegration and re-formation!

But wait, there's MORE! For with these drafts—the very genesis of her final, froggish magnum opus!—came a curious, almost obsessive collection: a meticulously curated list of citations! Not the academic detritus of the pedestrian scholar, oh no! These were the very wellsprings of Yevdokim's eclectic, international, and utterly bonkers worldview! Real films, real music, real historical records, spanning continents and languages, from the dusty archives of Ukrainian cinema to the grim medical treatises of historical maladies, from the esoteric catalogs of Czech art to the very fabric of Soviet informal economies! They were the scaffolding of her surreal, the underpinnings of her absurdity, proof that even the most gloriously unhinged narrative can be built upon a foundation of meticulously observed, documented, and THOROUGHLY RESEARCHED REALITY!

So, as you embark upon this singular odyssey, this "Croaking of Kája," know that you are not merely reading a story. You are stepping into the intellectual crucible of a genius, a

woman who dared to distill the very flavor of chaos from the mundane, and who, with her final, magnificent literary croak, left us a testament to the bewildering, beautiful, and utterly unsalted nature of existence itself! Read on, dear reader, and prepare to be disquieted!

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An Overture to Disquiet: On the Ontology of Vanishing and the Predicament of Amphibian Desiderata

An Overture to Disquiet: On the Ontology of Vanishing and the Predicament of Amphibian Desiderata

One perceives, does one not, a certain Sisyphean futility in the very act of chronicle, particularly when the subject matter itself, replete with the effluvia of the quotidian and the startling intrusions of the utterly improbable, resists the orderly strictures of linear progression. Indeed, to speak of Orono, Maine, on that particular eve—an eve saturated, rather preposterously, with the scent of ozone, a meteorological non sequitur defying the very calendrical principles upon which our fragile temporal edifice is constructed—is to invite the very collapse of epistemological certitude. One might, perhaps, as well attempt to diagram the precise trajectory of a quantum particle whilst simultaneously attempting to catalogue the existential anxieties of a forgotten brand of artisanal cheese. And yet, here we are, confronted by the ineluctable fact of disappearance, the lacuna of Das Mädchen, whose nominative fluidity—a protean moniker shimmering like heat haze over asphalt—was itself a premonition of her spectral non-presence. Her vanishing, a laconic fait accompli, was punctuated solely by the orphaned handbag; a sartorial anachronism, perhaps, or merely a testament to the persistent melancholia of misplaced accessories, its clasp agape as if articulating, through mute despair, a profound semiotic complaint. This very satchel, a vessel of erstwhile domesticity, belonged, as we shall, with a certain reluctant fascination, discover, to Kája—a creature of amphibian persuasion, black as the deepest recess of a theologian's doubt, and whose perpetual state of aggrieved irascibility was, to the discerning observer, a philosophical constant. Kája, positioned with the gravitas of a forgotten deity atop an tottering cairn of vinyl records—those circular, grooved relics, resurrected from the purgatorial dustbin of technological obsolescence, now strangely imbued with a quasi-sacred aura in our era of digital ephemera—was, in the argot of the vulgate, utterly apoplectic. His vocalisation, a high-pitched squeak, reminiscent of a medieval torture device whose hinges had succumbed to the relentless gnawing of time and neglect, lacerated the pre-dusk air. The

girl, Das Mädchen, in her brief, tantalising orbit through the quotidian, had been charged with a mission of singular import: the delivery of his most cherished possession, a vintage salt shaker, its limited-edition artistry manifesting in the unsettling effigy of a pre-syphilitic William Davenant. The irony, one notes, is not merely structural; it is, rather, a profound mise en abyme of historical contingency.

Act I: The Ontological Void and the Historical Lesion

Across the town's somnolent sprawl, where the very clapboards seemed to sigh with the weight of unrecorded histories, the Orono Historical Society hummed with a quiet, almost imperceptible tremor of scholarly excitement, akin to the faint resonance of a tuning fork struck eons ago. The tremor emanated from the recent disinterment—from the sepia-toned archives of forgotten lives—of a portrait. It was William Davenant, yes, his countenance rendered with an eerie verisimilitude to John Greenhill's brushwork, yet bearing an almost imperceptible, yet profoundly significant, nasal disfigurement—a subtle, almost discreet, tragedy etched by the relentless progression of morbus gallicus. One could almost hear the rustle of scholarly footnotes in the air. A local historian, Dr. Alistair Finchley, his mind a labyrinthine construct woven from the threads of Enlightenment discourse and the gossamer whispers of forgotten cartographers, murmured, more to himself than to the hushed, expectant motes of dust dancing in the archival sunlight, of the "cyclical nature of maladies." It was, he ruminated, a melancholic echo, a contrapuntal fugue of human suffering repeating across the temporal canvas. His own nose, he observed with a mordant, almost Augustinian humor, bore the faint, almost lyrical scars of cocaine-induced midline destructive lesions (CIMDL)—a particularly nasty modern affliction, a stark, almost brutalist echo of historical decay, a grotesque mirror held up to the face of past infirmities. His dates, he lamented, with the weariness of a man who had traversed too many unfulfilling blind alleys of academic pursuit and romantic misadventure, were as disastrous as the era's plagues, each rejection a fresh bubo on the landscape of his increasingly desiccated emotional life.

Kája, from his perch atop the tottering vinyl tower, had observed the hurried, breathless departure of Das Mädchen. His internal monologue, a series of rapid-fire, almost subliminal croaks that registered in his amphibian brain as perfectly articulated, if somewhat accusatory, syllogisms, pulsed: " She... vanished. A mere whisper of a girl, a transient phenomenon, and with her, my saliniferous solace, my crystalline comfort. The audacity! The sheer, unmitigated gall of human ephemerality! Was it a test? A cruel, existential prank by the universe, or merely the clumsy choreography of an inferior species? This salt, this very essence, this granular poetry, is not a mere condiment; it is the ontological anchor of my amphibian soul. Without it, the universe collapses into a tasteless, bland abyss. And this Davenant fellow, with his syphilitic nasal lamentations—a visual cacophony of historical decay—oh, how it mirrors the decay of my very expectations, the slow, agonizing erosion of my faith in the reliability of bipedal delivery systems! This is not merely inconvenience; this is a profound violation of the cosmic order, a salt-less void threatening to engulf me, the black frog of consequence, in its bland, unspeakable maw. "

His high-pitched squeak, a sound that, to the uninitiated, might suggest a mere mechanical malfunction, was, in fact, a declaration of war against the insipid.

Act II: The Ornithological Elegy and the Amphibian Pragmatism

In a cramped apartment, its very architecture seeming to groan under the sheer weight of accumulated detritus and deferred maintenance, the Mistress of the Chicken presided over her chaotic kingdom with the weary resignation of a benevolent but overburdened monarch. Her days unfolded in a relentless, almost ritualistic ballet of feeding—the clucking denizens demanding sustenance with the imperiousness of pampered patrons—cleaning—a Sisyphean struggle against the inevitable accrual of feathers and forgotten crumbs—and the endless, ultimately futile, pursuit of order, a quest as elusive as the very

notion of absolute moral purity. This particular evening, her borscht—a dish of profound solace, a crimson elixir of comfort, promising warmth and succor against the encroaching chill of an uncertain world—was tragically doomed to an egregious blandness. The absence of salt, that fundamental crystallisation of flavour, that alchemical transformer of the mundane into the sublime, rendered it a mere vegetal broth, a culinary elegy to absence. Her odyssey for this essential condiment, this very essence of savour, mirrored with a chilling, almost unsettling fidelity, the Kafkaesque absurdities of Oleksandr Viken's Service, that obscure Soviet-era cinematic masterpiece where the subtle, insidious currency of favors superseded all logical economic frameworks, becoming the very sinews of survival in a world constructed from bureaucratic caprice. Her neighbor, Guska, a woman whose eyes held the flinty glint of a thousand unspoken transactions, demanded a service, a precise and quantifiable quid pro quo, in return for the coveted salt. This seemingly innocuous request initiated a chain of bureaucratic absurdities, each exchange meticulously rendered, in the Mistress's mind's eye, with the stark, almost grotesque precision of Eduard Kyrych's aquatint etchings, elevating the mundanity of domestic barter to the surreal heights of a socio-political critique.

Kája, ever the opportunistic voyeur, had been eavesdropping from his elevated vinyl sanctuary, a clandestine auditor of human folly. His inner monologue, a torrent of guttural pronouncements that seemed to vibrate with a nascent, almost predatory, intelligence: " Ah, the human condition, perpetually flailing in the quagmire of its own petty needs! This woman, this Mistress of Feathered Domesticity, wallows in her unsalted sorrow. Her lamentations—a cacophony of culinary despair—are but a prelude to my intervention. My inherent grumpiness, that wellspring of my existential discontent, that cosmic force of nature, resonates with her plight. Not, mind you, out of some saccharine, mawkish altruism—perish the thought!—but rather from a perverse, almost aesthetic desire for order, a craving for the rectification of cosmic imbalance, and perhaps, one must confess, a soupçon of exquisite schadenfreude. To witness their bipedal contortions, their desperate dances for mere crystals—it is a delightful spectacle. My squeaks, these resonant vibrations, these sonic pronouncements, though incomprehensible to the uninitiated, shall be, to her, a symphony of divine instruction. I shall be the unseen hand, the amphibian puppeteer, orchestrating their absurd ballet, all in pursuit of a single, gleaming grain. "

His squeaks, though still possessing the quality of a rusty hinge, now carried the undeniable weight of strategic pronouncements. He was not merely croaking; he was directing.

Act III: The Absurdist Cascade and the Amphibian Maestro's Demands

Kája's directives, issued in a staccato burst of amphibian imperiousness, initiated a cascade of barters, each more exquisitely absurd than the last, like a meticulously constructed Rube Goldberg machine designed by a Dadaist. To extract the much-coveted salt from Guska's flinty grip, the Mistress must undertake the laborious, almost ritualistic task of ironing a collection of vintage lace doilies—each thread a testament to forgotten domesticity, each pattern a ghost of a bygone era. For the essential iron itself, a tool of such prosaic utility, she was informed, with the solemnity befitting a theological pronouncement, that she would require a rare Czech Informel art catalog, a tome of obscure aesthetic significance, which, in a delightful twist of postmodern irony, was currently serving as a coaster beneath a sweating glass of lukewarm tap water in the possession of the Orono Historical Society's curator. The catalog, in turn, a dusty artifact of a niche art movement, necessitated the acquisition of a newly re-scanned Ukrainian version of Service from the Dovzhenko Center—a digitized relic of a Soviet-era film, itself a testament to the absurdities of bureaucratic exchange. The narrative, like a tightly wound spring suddenly released, spiraled outwards, reality fraying at its very edges, exposing the gossamer thinness of its construct. The historical—a Davenant nose scarred by ancient malady—the mundane—a bowl of unsalted borscht—and the fantastical—a talking frog orchestrating human commerce—collided in a frenetic quest, a dizzying, kaleidoscopic dance that defied all conventional notions of causality.

Kája, his squeaks acquiring an almost manic intensity, orchestrating this grand, unwitting performance, felt the delicious frisson of control. His inner monologue, a complex, multi-layered tapestry of strategic intent and philosophical musing, unfurled: " Observe them,

these bipedal automatons, caught in the intricate web of their own creation! They barter, they exchange, they dance to the tune of my amphibian will. This is not mere assistance; it is a profound sociological experiment, a grand opera of absurdity. I am not simply aiding the Mistress in her pedestrian pursuit of sodium chloride; I am conducting a symphony of human convolution, a biting critique of their insatiable needs and the preposterously intricate, fundamentally illogical systems they construct to fulfill them. Each doily, each catalog, each digitized film reel—a note in my discordant opus, a testament to the profound emptiness that drives their desperate commerce. And the salt shaker, my beautiful, Davenant-esque salt shaker, remains—for now—beyond their grasp, a tantalizing symbol of my ultimate victory, my quiet, croaking dominion over the trivialities of their existence. "

Act IV: The Salty Ascent: A Fugue in Miniature

The tension, stretched taut as a violin string before the fortissimo crescendo, climaxed in a montage; an Eisensteinian ode not to revolutionary fervor, but to the exquisitely mundane, to the very absurdity of human striving. A cracked ceramic egg, a symbol of fragile beginnings or shattered expectations, rolled with a disconcerting deliberation down a grimy stairwell, its trajectory seemingly dictated by some unseen, malevolent hand. Kája's tear—a single, iridescent droplet, a liquid pearl of amphibian anguish or perhaps, just perhaps, of pure, unadulterated mirth—glistened in the ambient lamplight. The Mistress's hand, calloused by a lifetime of domestic toil, trembled over the formidable, almost menacing, presence of an antique iron, its polished surface reflecting a distorted, almost Cubist, vision of her anxious visage. The curator, a man typically confined to the contemplative stillness of scholarly pursuit, sprinted through the hushed halls of the Historical Society, the rare Czech Informel art catalog clutched in his perspiring hand, its pages fluttering like the agitated wings of a startled bird. The Service VHS tape, its Cyrillic spine askew, a testament to its hurried retrieval, seemed to whisper tales of Soviet bureaucracy and cinematic esotericism. Guska's lace doily, pristine and unnervingly perfect, caught the moonlight through a grimy window, transforming the mundane textile into an ethereal, almost spiritual, artifact. And the salt

shaker—that elusive, plain, yet singularly desiderated object—hovered, a ghost in the periphery of their collective consciousness, just beyond the grasping tendrils of their desperate reach. Kája's throat pulsed, a rhythmic contraction, his squeak a desperate, almost plaintive plea—the very sound of his soul yearning for crystalline completion. The handbag, Das Mädchen's last tangible trace, lay forlorn on the polished floor, an iridescent feather—a fragment of a forgotten dream, or perhaps, the discarded plumage of a fleeting thought—its only companion. Das Mädchen herself, a figure rendered in the blurred, dreamlike washes of a forgotten Impressionist painting, rushed through Orono's echoing streets, the Amazon package—a modern-day Pandora's Box, or perhaps, merely a harbinger of belated gratification—clutched tightly to her chest, its contents still shrouded in cardboard mystery.

Act V: The Crystalline Denouement and the Final Amphibian Euphony

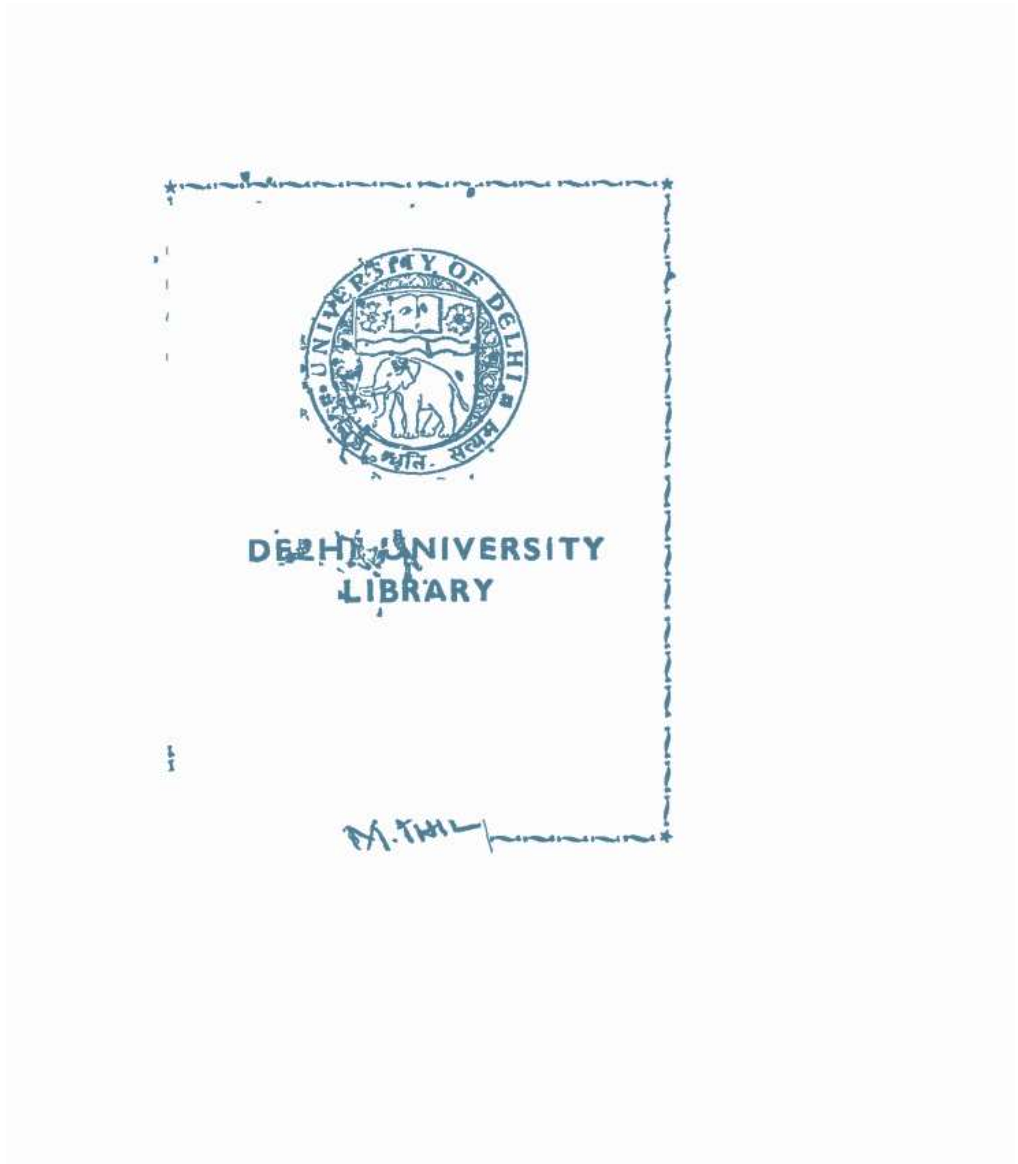
And then, as if by some invisible hand of narrative decree, or perhaps merely the inevitable culmination of relentless, if absurd, effort, the Mistress acquired salt—not, one notes, the fetishized Davenant shaker, but a simple, unadorned bag, its contents humble, yet profoundly effective. As she sprinkled the crystalline powder into the waiting embrace of the borscht, a temporary peace descended upon the cramped apartment, a quiet, almost spiritual, truce in the endless battle against blandness. The aroma, now properly seasoned, permeated the air, a promissory note of simple satisfaction. Kája, his grand, if convoluted, scheme brought to its gratifying conclusion, emitted a triumphant squeak, a sound that, to the discerning ear, could only be interpreted as an amphibian shout of victory. And just as the last vestiges of culinary anxiety dissipated, the handbag, like a recurring motif in a complex symphonic composition, reappeared, almost miraculously, ex nihilo, the Davenant shaker—that object of such profound yearning and such convoluted pursuit—nestled securely within its depths. Das Mädchen, it seemed, had been on a very odd detour indeed, a tangent into the surreal, a narrative sidetrack from which she had, perhaps inevitably, returned.

The Mistress, at peace with her now-savory borscht, a warm glow of contentment suffusing her weary countenance, and Kája, serenely polishing his hard-won Davenant shaker, its ceramic form gleaming faintly in the dim light, were ready. Ready, not for repose, not for the quietude of a well-earned rest, but for their next absurd adventure, for the next convolution of circumstance, the next existential dance. The story, like a half-remembered dream, faded, leaving behind it a lingering echo of the liminal—that indeterminate, shimmering space between, where the absurd was not an anomaly but the very norm, and the unspoken hum of transition, the ceaseless thrum of becoming and un-becoming, was the true, unsung protagonist.

Curtain Fall, or Perhaps, a Shimmering Dissolution: On the Persistent Flavor of Chaos

In the final, shimmering moments, when the very fabric of the narrative seemed to thin, to become diaphanous, a Wrightian one-liner—that pithy, gnomic utterance that encapsulates volumes of unspoken truth—hung suspended in the charged atmosphere: "Salt is but a metaphor for the flavor we seek in chaos." It lingered, resonating with the quiet profundity of a Zen koan, or perhaps, merely a particularly insightful bon mot from a slightly inebriated philosopher. The liminal space, that character in its own right, with its faded glamour and its perpetual twilight, that interstitial realm where logic bent and reality stretched, remained. It was a space, one might observe, where the raw edges of existence were always exposed, where the promise of the next impossible thing perpetually beckoned. Kája's squeak, now reduced to a mere fragment of memory, a phantom vibration in the ear of the mind, hinted, with an almost melancholic resignation, at the ceaseless cycles of recurrence, at the endless return of the strange and the familiar. The reader, now adrift in the wake of this peculiar odyssey, was left not with definitive answers, but with a lingering sense of wonder, a subtle unease that might be mistaken for discomfort, and a profound, almost spiritual, reflection—a testament, indeed, to the

joyous despair that permeates the very heart of the absurd. One might, after all, simply add water. Or perhaps, more appropriately, salt.



One Tear, Two Sides

By Taj McNaughten

Part A:

The Melting Lattice of Unrhymed Hours

A screaming gull escapes the asylum's iron ribs,
its wings a map of static, feathers inked with the names of forgotten hospitals—
St. Paul's, the Vancouver General, the Mental Ward's Sigh.
He walks, a pilgrim of fractured light,
southward, where the T Bone district hums with the fever-dream of meth,
its streets a labyrinth of neon and needle-pricks,
each shadow a ghost of the 2,000 who've melted into the soil since 2019.
In the dirt, he builds a fort from scrap metal—
an anachronistic cathedral, its spires forged from syringes and the bones of a drinking bird,
its beak frozen mid-dip, a relic of Franklin's pulse hammer.
Here, he writes: The world is a ledger of lost breath,
each line a fentanyl fold, a hunch of the spine,
a whisper of the 108,000 who've dissolved into the air.
The DTES, a chorus of unsheltered tongues,
sings to him in the language of the homeless,
a dialect of $75 income assistance and 3,400 waitlisted for shelter.
He imagines the Tenderloin's Little Saigon—
a street of rice paper and pho, where the scent of carfentanil lingers
like a cursed incense.

His poem, a surrealist epic, unravels:
A parliament of pigeons, their feathers dipped in the ink of Renaissance ledgers,
debates the ethics of nitazene—800 times morphine, 40 times fentanyl—
while a pig named Machiavelli, draped in a clown's patchwork coat,
tries to reenact the Compton's Cafeteria riot with a U-shaped tube of acetone.
"History," he cackles, "is just a drunkard's spill on a medieval manuscript."
The man's tree fort becomes a Minto wheel,
its gears made of stolen fentanyl patches and the teeth of a sleeping bear.
He dreams of the insatiable birdie from Perelman's pages,
its headtube cooling, its vapor a language of what if you touched something that had fentanyl on it?
A clownfish named Pierrot weeps into a water-filled ledger,
each page a flood of "I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine"—
until the rat-Leonardo, clutching a blueprint of a flying bureaucrat,
scatters the records like confetti, and the fort melts into a puddle of what's next?
The poem ends where it begins:
A gull, a man, a fort, a city—
all dissolving, all existing,
all growing in the shadow of the 2,420 homeless,
the 92,000 dead,
the unrhymed hours that refuse to be counted.

Inspired by the DTES, the Tenderloin, and the silent epidemic of nitazene. A poem written in the language of the disappeared, for the ones who bend over, who melt, who build. The tree fort is real. The melting is real. The poem is a bridge.
Part B
Title: The Nitazene Pigeon's Lament (or, How to Fold Without Breaking)
(An Anachronistic Anthropomorphic Burlesque in the Key of Overdose Blue)

Act I: Escape From the Raincoat Asylum

(Vancouver's Downtown East side. A pigeon named Gregor—formerly Patient #4729 at Riverview Hospital—plucks lithium crumbs from the cracks in the sidewalk. The air smells of wet fentanyl patches and despair.)

GREGOR (one wing dragging like a broken receipt printer):
"They called me 'non-compliant.'
But compliance is just another word for 'folded.'
And I refuse.
Even if my bones creak like a shopping cart with one bad wheel."

(Enter: A coyote in a security guard's vest, chewing a NicoDerm patch like gum. His badge reads "Property of the Ministry of Lost Causes.")

COYOTE (bureaucratic monotone):
"Sir. Sir. You can't just waddle away.
There are forms.
Release forms. Relapse forms. Forms to prove you were never here.
Sign in triplicate, notarized by the ghost of Nurse Ratched."

GREGOR (spitting out a half-dissolved Prozac):
"I traded my medical records for a hitchhiker's thumb.
Stuck it out like a middle finger to the rain.
Next thing I knew, California was licking my feet
with its gasoline tongue."

(Cue: A chorus of dumpster rats in tiny Stetsons, harmonizing an off-key rendition of O Canada.)

Act II: The T-Bone District (A Butcher's Dream)

(San Francisco's Tenderloin, where the sidewalks are sticky with history and the pigeons wear better shoes than the people. Gregor builds his kingdom.)

GREGOR (stacking stolen shopping carts into a throne):
"They call this the Fold. Not the drug—the posture.

Bodies bent like question marks begging the pavement for an answer.
I built my fort from pallets and the ribs of a '98 Camry.
The rats bring me offerings: syringe caps, half a Monopoly shoe,
a love letter to someone named 'Methy.'"
(Enter: A raccoon in a sequin gown, claiming to be the Empress of the Tenderloin. She smells like stale wine and bad decisions.)
EMPRESS RACCOON (adjusting a tiara of shattered glass):
"Darling! You can't just exist here. You must perform.
The city demands tragedy with a laugh track.
Here—wear this traffic cone as a crown.
Now monologue."
(Gregor, obliging, recites the first stanza of his binational epic:)

THE POEM: How to Melt and Grow at the Same Time

(Free verse, unrhymed, scrawled on a Denny's napkin with ketchup.)
I am the pigeon who forgot his own wings.
Vancouver's rain still in my feathers,
but California's sun is a dentist's lamp
drilling cavities into my shadow.
I trade scrap metal for syllables.
A hubcap = one metaphor.
A muffler = three lines of existential dread.
(The raccoon says I undercharge.)
At night, the fentanyl birds fold themselves
into origami cranes.
The streets inhale.
The streets exhale.
I am neither.
I am the breath stuck in between.
They say nitazene is worse.
But what's worse than a city
that loves you like a landfill?

Chews you up, spits you out,
then names a district after the wound."

Act III: The Great Flight of the Clandestine Clown

(Gregor's tree fort collapses under the weight of its own symbolism.)
GREGOR (clutching a stolen library copy of Rimbaud's Complete Works):
"Icarus had wax. I've got duct tape and a shopping bag parachute.
The raccoon's betting I'll land in a dumpster.
The coyote's taking odds on 'arrested for poetic trespass.'
But the poem's not done yet—
see how it writhes like a nightcrawler on a sidewalk?"
(He jumps. The stage directions dissolve into a drugstore receipt.)
FINAL STAGE DIRECTION (smudged, possibly by tears or motor oil):
"Gregor neither flies nor falls.
He becomes the hyphen between
'Vancouver' and 'San Francisco.'
The poem eats itself.
The curtain is a flattened beer can.
Applause optional."

Epilogue
(Found Scratched into a Bathroom Stall):

"If you see a pigeon quoting Bukowski,
tell him the rent's due.
Tell him the Tenderloin is just a ribcage
waiting for someone to pick it clean."
(Genre credits: 30% commedia dell'arte, 20% Dadaist dumpster fire, 50% the sound a payphone makes when you drop it down a stairwell.)

LES DERNIÈRES FOLIES DE CRASH VÉGA

(Une Burlesque Anthropomorphique Anachronique en Trois Actes de Feu, d'Os et de Bretzels Gratuits)

Par **Pénélope Azalée Dubois-Chantefleur**

ACTE I: LE PALAIS DES ADIEUX (ET DES JACUZZIS)

L'établissement en question—La Coopérative Funéraire et Ludique des Adieux Spectaculaires—était un endroit où la décence venait mourir, et la mort venait se saouler. Niché dans un hangar Quonset rouillé, ses murs étaient ornés des regards solennels de sept velours noirs d'Elvis (chacun plus suggestivement hanché que le précédent), surveillant une veillée funèbre qui ressemblait davantage à une soirée de catch mexicain abandonnée par Dieu.

Le corbillard, une Ford Country Squire de 1978 (ses panneaux de bois écaillés comme une vieille porte de grange), attendait, son hayon grand ouvert, comme si la Mort elle-même avait oublié de fermer son frigo. Les croque-morts—une troupe de ratons laveurs en redingotes miteuses, menés par Sir Reginald P. Chancelade (un blaireau obsédé par la paperasse et une peur viscérale de l'inspection du travail)—dirigeaient les opérations avec la gravité d'une cour royale et la précision d'un accident de clown.

Au bar, Grand Salvador (un morse qui jurait descendre d'une lignée de gondoliers vénitiens) mélangeait des cocktails avec une louche, tandis qu'un enfant de huit ans, Petit Liam O'Shaughnessy, arbitrait une partie de billard avec le sérieux d'un juge papal. Le jacuzzi bouillonnait de manière inquiétante, ses eaux soupçonnées d'avoir dissous un contrôleur fiscal dans un passé trouble.
Et puis, il y avait Crash Véga (décédé).

ACTE II: LA LÉGENDE D'UN HOMME QUI NE SAVAIT PAS CASCADER

De son vivant, Crash Véga avait été un homme d'ambition singulière et d'exécution catastrophique. Sa carrière de cascadeur était moins une série d'exploits héroïques qu'une chronique des lois de la physique s'acharnant sur un homme trop têtu pour les comprendre.

Il conduisait des motos à travers des murs de flammes lors de kermesses scolaires—et devenait lui-même le mur de flammes. Il tentait des saltos—et faisait connaissance avec le sol à une vitesse alarmante.

«Mon garçon, on était si pauvres que ta pauvre mère devait utiliser un repose-cuillère comme cendrier», grogna Tío Máscara, une tache d'huile vaguement humanoïde qui buvait de la tequila dans un flacon d'embaumement recyclé.

«Tu te souviens quand l'inspection du travail est arrivée à l'improviste et que tu portais ce t-shirt "LA SÉCURITÉ, C'EST TROISIÈME" avec le type chevauchant un ours en buvant une bière ? Un coup de maître», soupira Doña Llorona, un flamant rose en voile de veuve, ajustant ses perles avec un pied préhensile.

Les funérailles de Crash Véga devaient être son dernier grand spectacle.

ACTE III : L'ASCENSION (OU COMMENT LA FORD APPRIT À VOLER)

La cérémonie commença par une oraison funèbre prononcée par Père O'Houlihan, un renard en col romain qui, jusqu'à récemment, avait été vendeur de voitures d'occasion.

«Amis, Romains, compatriotes—prêtez-moi vos bouchons d'oreilles, car Crash Véga a vécu comme il est mort : bruyamment, illégalement, et avec plusieurs procès en cours.»

Le cercueil (une baignoire à pieds recyclée) fut chargé dans la Ford. Les ratons laveurs, ayant abusé du «punch funéraire» (une mixture que Grand Salvador décrivait comme «principalement de l'alcool à 90° et des regrets»), tentèrent une procession solennelle. Puis—l'impensable.

Le moteur de la Ford rugit, non pas avec des explosions, mais avec le son indubitable d'un thérémine joué par un fantôme vengeur. Les panneaux de bois se couvrirent de plumes. Le hayon s'ouvrit grand, et le cercueil de Crash Véga se mit à lévitation, flottant à quinze centimètres au-dessus d'un tas de bretzels rassis.

«Messieurs», déclara Sir Chancelade en ajustant son monocle, «je crois que nous sommes sur le point de commettre une infraction routière d'ordre cosmique.»

La Ford bondit—non pas sur la route, mais vers le ciel, s'élevant dans une spirale d'étincelles, de caoutchouc brûlé et d'un léger arôme de poppers jalapeños. Le toit du hangar Quonset se rétracta (une fonctionnalité dont personne ne se souvenait), et les endeuillés regardèrent, bouche bée, alors que Crash Véga accomplissait sa dernière cascade : un bûcher funéraire dans la stratosphère.

Le flamant rose s'évanouit. Le morse applaudit. L'enfant rangea les boules de billard avec solennité.

Et quelque part, dans l'au-delà bureaucratique, un inspecteur du travail pleura dans son registre.

FIN.

THE LATEST LUNACIES OF CRASH VEGA

(An Anthropomorphic Anachronistic Burlesque
in Three Acts of Fire, Bone,
and Complimentary Pretzels)

Translated from the French by
the froufrou fistful, graciously
assisted by Karine Séverine
Chaput.

ACT I: THE PALACE OF GOODBYES (AND HOT TUBS)

The establishment in question—The Cooperative Funeral and Frolicsome Emporium of Spectacular Farewells—was, to put it mildly, a locale where decency went to expire, and death itself came to get gloriously soused. Tucked away within the rusty embrace of a Quonset hut, its walls were bedecked with the solemn gazes of seven black velvet Elvises (each more suggestively hip-swiveling than the last), presiding over a wake that bore an uncanny resemblance to a Mexican wrestling match God had forgotten to attend.

The hearse, a 1978 Ford Country Squire (its wood paneling peeling like the forgotten veneer of an old barn door), idled, its tailgate agape, as if Death herself had simply neglected to shut her cosmic refrigerator. The undertakers—a troupe of raccoons in threadbare tailcoats, led by Sir Reginald P. Chancelade (a badger obsessed with paperwork and possessed of a visceral dread of occupational safety inspections)—directed the proceedings with the gravity of a royal court and the precision of a clown car pile-up.

At the bar, Grand Salvador (a walrus who swore he was descended from a long line of Venetian gondoliers) mixed cocktails with a ladle, while an eight-year-old child, Little Liam O'Shaughnessy, officiated a game of billiards with the solemnity of a papal judge. The hot tub burbled ominously, its waters long suspected of having dissolved a tax auditor in some murky, unlamented past.
And then, of course, there was Crash Vega (deceased).

ACT II: THE LEGEND OF A MAN WHO KNEW NOT HOW TO STUNT

In his terrestrial sojourn, Crash Vega had been a man of singular ambition and catastrophic execution. His career as a stuntman was less a ledger of heroic derring-do than a doleful chronicle of the laws of physics relentlessly asserting themselves upon a fellow too stubborn to comprehend their immutable dictates.

He would, with the bravado of a particularly ill-advised lemming, ride motorcycles through walls of flame at school fetes—and promptly become the wall of flame himself. He would attempt somersaults—and make an uncomfortably intimate acquaintance with the ground at alarming velocity.

“My boy, we were so poor, your poor mother had to use a spoon rest for an ashtray,” growled Tío Máscara, a vaguely humanoid oil stain who imbibed tequila from a repurposed embalming fluid flask.

“Remember when OSHA showed up unannounced and you were wearing that ‘SAFETY IS THIRD’ T-shirt with the guy riding a bear and drinking a beer? A stroke of genius,” sighed Doña Llorona, a flamingo in a widow's veil, adjusting her pearls with a prehensile foot.
Crash Vega's funeral, it was universally agreed, was to be his final, grand spectacle.

ACT III: THE ASCENSION (OR HOW THE FORD LEARNED TO FLY)

The obsequies commenced with a eulogy delivered by Father O’Houlihan, a fox in a Roman collar who, until recently, had been peddling used automobiles.

“Friends, Romans, countrymen—lend me your earplugs, for Crash Vega lived as he died: loudly, unlawfully, and with several ongoing lawsuits.”

The casket (a repurposed clawfoot bathtub, it must be noted) was loaded into the Ford. The raccoons, having partaken perhaps too freely of the "funeral punch" (a concoction Grand Salvador described as "mostly grain alcohol and regrets"), attempted a solemn procession.

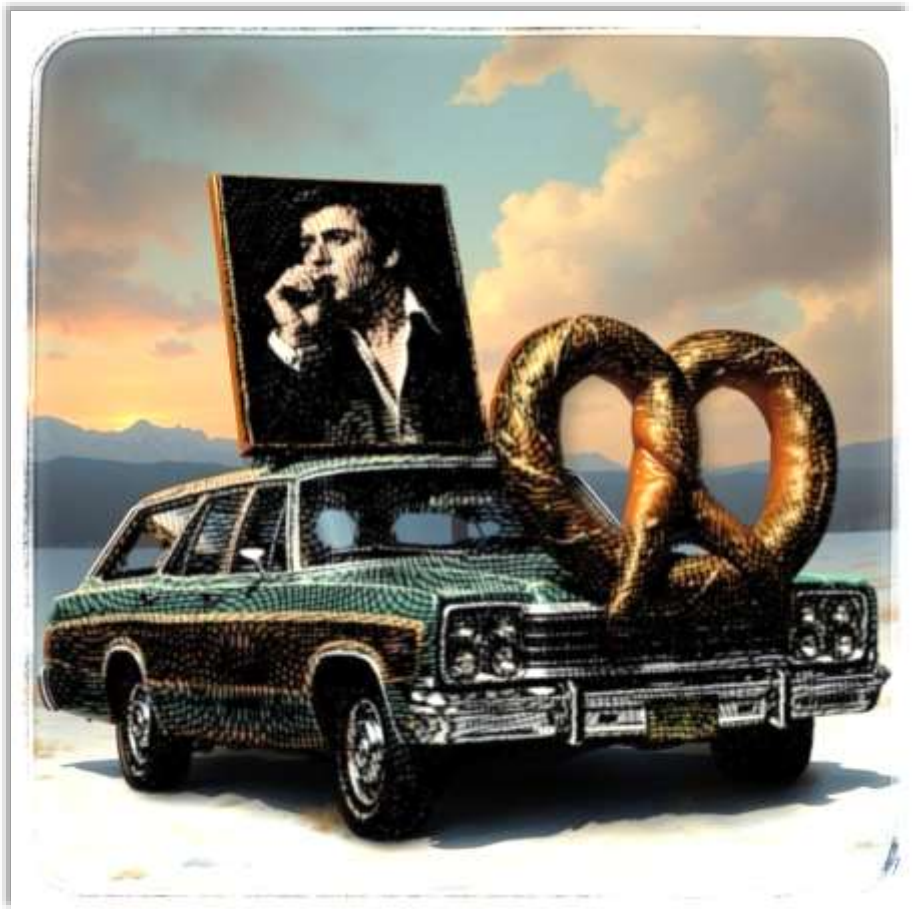
Then—the unthinkable.

The Ford’s engine roared, not with mere explosions, but with the unmistakable sound of a theremin played by a particularly vengeful poltergeist. The wood panels sprouted feathers. The tailgate swung wide, and Crash Vega’s casket began to levitate, hovering six inches above a pile of stale pretzels.

“Gentlemen,” declared Sir Chancelade, adjusting his monocle, “I believe we are about to commit a cosmic traffic infraction.”

The Ford then bounded—not onto the road, but skyward, ascending in a spiraling vortex of sparks, burning rubber, and a faint aroma of jalapeño poppers. The Quonset hut roof retracted (a feature no one quite remembered), and the mourners watched, mouths agape, as Crash Vega performed his ultimate stunt: a stratospheric pyre.
The flamingo swooned. The walrus applauded. The child solemnly racked the billiard balls.

And somewhere, in the bureaucratic hereafter, a lonely OSHA inspector wept into his ledger.



Here is a Particular Fault which I have observed in most of the Moralists in all Ages and that is, that they are always professing themselves and teaching others to be this State is not to be arrived at in this erefore I would recommend to you to an humbler Strain than your Predeceſſors truct us only to be eaſy. n who would be diſcreet, ar e things, ſhould turn r than Promoting be avoided, but ined. The grea gularity of Spirit, nefs and below M be ſupported if a a Prudent Man ſho ſhould naturally arife he Occaſion ſeldom be fa Tempers who want Mirth to be the Conſtitutions which ſtag withou Brandy. Therefore, I ſay, let your pr which muſt be hurried out of it felt by the Laughter or ſenſual Pleaſure, or elſe be wholly inactive.

There are a Couple of old Fellows of my Acquaintance, who meet every Day and ſmoak a Pipe, and by their mutual Love to each ot tho' they have been Men of Buſineſs in the World, enjoy a greater either could have work'd h ter of Senſes. Indolence of we aim at no more; is very Enquiry after

worth your
the Relations and Affinities
render their Converſation with each
grateful, that the higheſt Talents give but an
impotent Pleaſure in the Compariſon with them.
You may find Deſcriptions and Diſcourſes which
will render the Fire-Side of an honeſt Artificer as
entertaining as your own Club is to you. Good-
nature has an endleſs Source of Pleaſure in it;
and the Repreſentation of domeſtick Life, filled
with its natural Gratifications; (inſtead of the ne-
ſations which are generally inſiſted up-
ritings of the Witty) will be a very

of Labour and Reſt in the low-
nd, make their Being paſs away
Reliſh which we expreſs by the
nd ſhould be treated of by you,
as well as ſuch Subjects, which
ſpeculative, but are leſs in-
Sir, I would have you turn
dvantage of ſuch as want
Simplicity, Innocence,
, are Arts which lead
as Learnings Wiſdom,
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Care to avoid. The ſever-
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have long ſince been ſet
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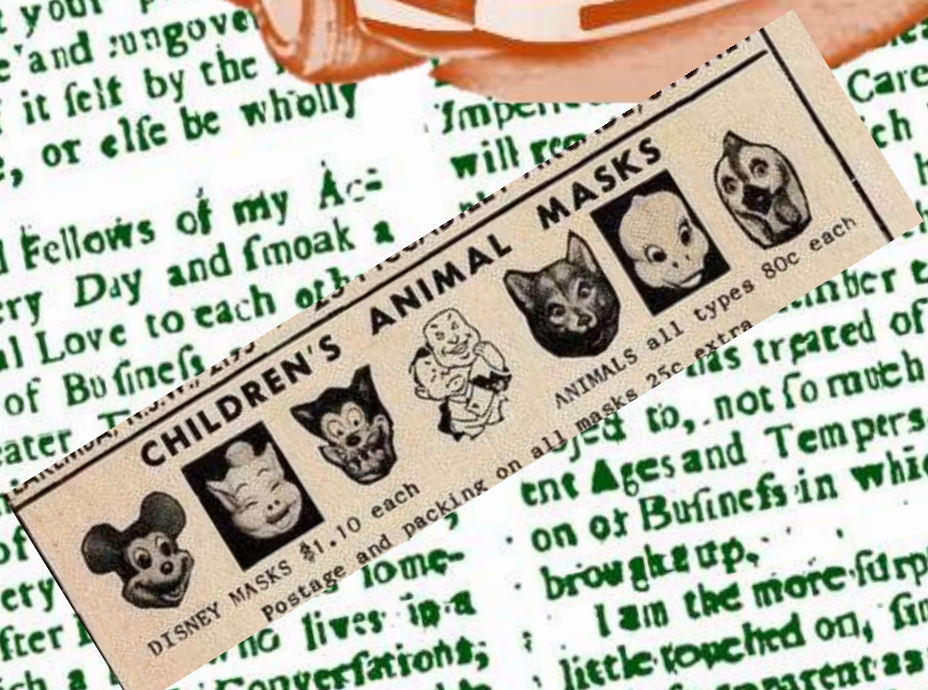
mber to have met with any Au
ed to, not ſo much by Reaſon of their diffe
ent Ages and Tempers, as the particular Profe
on or Buſineſs in which they were educated
brought up.

I am the more ſurprized to find this Subje
little touched on, ſince what I am here ſpea
concerns not to eſcape the moſt v
Buſineſs Men are chiefl
certain

PAYDAY
PEANUT
CARAMEL BAR
NET WT .7 OZ (19 g)
INGREDIENTS: PEANUTS, SUGAR, CORN SYRUP, SKIM MILK, VEGETABLE OIL (PALM OIL,
CONTAINS 2% OR LESS OF: SALT, CARRAGEENAN, MONO- AND DIGLYCERIDES.
CONTAINS: PEANUTS, MILK.



RN/RV/RIP: The Port Orange Fragmentations — A Lava Cake of Beatnik Neo-Modern Dada

By Coretta Cathie Watkins

Ewelina, a woman of heretofore impeccable breeding and unyielding composure, found herself residing beneath the Bridge Street overpass in Port Orange, within the confines of a Vixen SE motorized camper, a curious conveyance indeed, constructed so as to permit a gentleman of six-and-twenty stone to stand quite fully. NURSE OUTCAST LIVES UNDER BRIDGE! shrieked the sensational rag, its ink smudged as if by spectral fingers. A curlew's lamentable cry pierced the humid air, a sound thin and reedy, a lament for lost gentilities. The weight of bureaucratic malevolence settled upon her spirit, a tenacious incubus, refusing to be banished, clinging to her as tenaciously as the cheapest, most cloying perfume. The sump, a device of surprising efficacy, gurgled, lifting the grey

water from the shower pan, a minor victory, perchance, in a campaign of profound defeat. Embrace Courage to Drive Meaningful Change, a mantra she sometimes intoned, though its meaning had, of late, grown exceedingly mutable. A new fly pattern for redfish, tied with meticulous care but a mere eight hours prior, lay upon the dash, a tiny, vibrant promise in the encroaching gloom, a luminescence hinting at realities beyond the mundane.

Her front seats, by a clever mechanism, flipped backward, thus joining the dinette, which, truth be told, seldom accommodated more than a solitary diner. Port Orange, Florida: a municipality of some sixty-four thousand, two hundred and ten souls, according to the latest census. The banality of existence, a familiar ache, a dull throbbing behind the eyes, did indeed pervade this subtropical clime. Her kitchen, comprising a microwave and an electric refrigerator, held little comfort, merely the chilled remnants of a life once lived with a certain measured grace. The data, hidden, like a lover's secret, pulsed within the vast, indifferent network. "To the Bat-Cave, Robin!" she murmured, a peculiar exclamation, as she stirred instant coffee, its bitterness matching her thoughts with a brutal precision. Is the system broken? The very question seemed to waft on the fetid breeze. She heard the far-off drone of airboats, a swampy counterpoint to her urban desolation, a mechanical roar against nature's ancient murmurings. Her flashlight beam, a nervous, almost frantic finger of light, traced erratic patterns on the RV's ceiling, as if seeking an answer inscribed upon the very firmament.

Ewelina's thoughts, a restless hive: *The way he looked at me, Dr. Thorne. Like I was a flaw in his perfect, shining system. Luc was not a flaw; he was a child. They never saw that, did they? They saw only the ledger, the liability, the inconvenience.*

Flashback: Dr. Thorne’s voice, unctuous and smooth as a morgue slab, echoed in the sterile psych unit hallway, a chill that transcended mere temperature. "Ms. Davies," he had uttered, his countenance utterly devoid of human warmth, "your advocacy for patient Luc... it borders upon outright insubordination. We cannot, under any circumstances, tolerate epistemological uncertainties pervading the evidentiary paradigm." His eyes, cold and assessing as a winter morning, had held the precise, predatory calculation of a loan shark determining interest.

She recalled Luc's small hand, clammy in hers, a fragile bird caught in a storm. Villainy, once unleashed, knows no bounds! she'd thought, a silent scream trapped behind her teeth, a desperate, unheard shriek. She yearned for a life of passion, of ardour, of ecstasy, such as one might read in the most fervent Romantic verses, but found only the profound weariness of the truth, hard and unyielding as a cheap motel mattress, its springs broken by countless, nameless miseries. This simple trick will make him adore you! –the saccharine headline from a discarded women's periodical mocked her with its cheerful, imbecilic promise.

"Old Man Jenkins," she rasped, her voice hoarse, as his silhouette, gaunt and stooped, appeared against the halogen glow of the underpass. He was, to her estimation, a venerable keeper of whispers, a purveyor of tabloid truths, a connoisseur of the city's discarded histories, a living archive of urban decay. "Perchance, any news concerning the old Gulf Coast warehouse? The one yonder, near the abandoned fish plant?"
He spat tobacco juice, a dark starburst upon the concrete, like a sudden, grotesque bloom. "Heard tell they moved some boxes. Large ones. Marked 'Medical Waste.' Said they needed ventilation: essential." His eyes, like cloudy marbles, held a strange, knowing glint, the kind one acquires only from a lifetime of witnessing the world's inexorable decay. "Might find what you're looking for, madam. Or what's left. Failure to comply may result in system corruption." A faint, acrid smell of diesel exhaust mingled with the river's decay, a symphony of urban rot that permeated the very fabric of existence.
Ewelina's thoughts, sharp as glass: *Medical Waste. That's how they classified lives. Luc's life. My life. A convenient disposal, to be sure.*

A shiver of pure dread crawled up her spine, cold as a graveyard slab, its chill insinuating itself into her very bones. She felt it too, that chilling taste of disillusionment, bitter as cheap gin, a flavor that clung to her palate. She needed those boxes, those elusive hard drives. Archival data as primary evidence. The proof of their monstrous design, a hidden architecture of malevolence.

Back in the RV, the full-sized bed offered weary comfort, a brief respite from the relentless gnawing of her obsession. She dreamed of Luc, a child again, his eyes wide with a fear that had never quite left him, a fear that had imprinted itself upon his very

soul. The long-term effects of childhood trauma on developmental trajectories. She'd tried to save him. Own Your Narrative. She folded a page from Women's Weekly – "Ten Ways to Reignite Your Spark!" – and tossed it aside, the absurdity of its saccharine promise a cruel, lacerating joke.

She woke with a jolt, her heart hammering like a trapped bird. The Port Orange night, thick with humidity, held its secrets close, whispering them to the rustling palm fronds, an ancient, knowing murmur. The quantum entanglement of subatomic particles defies classical observation. Yet, her connection to Luc, to the buried truth, was undeniable, a steel cable in the fog, a binding force in the chaos. Unmask the truth!

Her quest for the boxes led Ewelina south, deeper into the forgotten industrial heart of Florida, bordering the ancient, simmering mystery of the Everglades. The deep woods conceal many secrets. The processing plant was a hulking ruin, its concrete bones picked clean by neglect and time, like a giant, rotting carcass. Step 1: Locate the access point. The air hung heavy, a miasma of decay and memory, thick enough to taste, to choke upon. Inside, a cavernous space, dark and echoing, where the very silence seemed to hum with forgotten sorrows. Mildew coated forgotten machinery, a velvety shroud of green and black. Rust bled down concrete walls like weeping wounds, the metal succumbing to the damp. Mosquitoes hummed a relentless tune, a buzzing chorus of indifference, a constant torment. Her flashlight cut through the oppressive black, a shaky beacon, its beam dancing on the walls. On a cracked wall, a faded, crudely drawn figure with a lantern, looking strikingly like Diogenes in his perpetual search, beneath the scrawled words, "WHERE ARE THE GOOD ONES?" And there, amidst water-damaged filing cabinets, amidst the detritus of discarded lives, was a man.

He was young, yet etched with the deep lines of premature age, as if time had accelerated its cruel hand specifically for him. His gaunt frame was draped in a torn, quilted shirt jacket that flapped around him, held together by frayed threads and sheer, desperate stubbornness. A mostly finished six-pack of cheap beer lay by his foot, its last two cans beaded with condensation, a testament to fleeting solace. The wind, a restless spirit, tugged at the plastic tarps he had strung around a makeshift sleeping area, revealing glimpses of a stained, lumpy mattress, a pathetic attempt at comfort. His hair was

matted, a tangled birds' nest, his fingernails rimmed with grime, as if he had been clawing at the earth itself, and a faint, acrid smell of unwashed humanity and stale alcohol clung to him, a bitter perfume. His eyes, though older, still held the echoed, haunted light of a child's fear—Luc.

Luc's thoughts: *Another one. They always come back. Like the gators in the canal. Looking for something. Don't they know there's nothing left? Nothing to take. Just the empty space where a life used to be.*

"Luc?" she whispered, the name a fragile thing, caught in the stagnant air, a breath on a cold pane. Her flashlight beam trembled, catching his eyes, reflecting a flicker of her own desperation.
He flinched, turning slowly, his movements stiff, as if his joints were rusted, grinding with every rotation. Recognition, a flicker, a brief spark in the dullness, then a mask of weary indifference, a practiced blankness pulled over his features. He was sifting through torn files, pulling out stained papers, the pitiful remnants of a life discarded, scattered by the winds of fate. The commonplace, yet so often the tragic, in its stark, unadorned reality.

"Who are you?" His voice was raspy, like gravel grinding under a boot, a sound that spoke of disuse and hardship.

"It's me, Luc. Nurse Davies. From... the unit." She felt a raw ache in her chest, seeing him like this, a living monument to the system's cruelty, a walking, breathing epitaph.

A long silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken years, years of decay and forgotten cries. He stared, not seeing her fully, but the shadow of the past, a phantom limb he could not shake, an echo of what was lost. Memory, with its intricate threads, wove themselves into the present, binding them in an invisible, agonizing embrace. "They told me you were... gone."

"They tried to make me disappear. Like they did with you. What are you doing here?" Her flashlight beam lingered on the empty beer cans, then swept up to his face.

He gestured vaguely at the scattered documents, a gesture of futility, of resigned defeat. "Looking for... something. Anything. They said I was crazy. That none of it happened."

His hands trembled, a tremor that seemed to run through his whole wasted body, a permanent vibration of fear and exhaustion. Desire, unfulfilled, hung about him like the scent of cheap beer, a constant reminder of what he lacked.
Luc's thoughts: *They broke me. Piece by piece. Like a cheap toy. Nurse Davies... she tried. But what's left now? Just dust. And the silence.*

A wave of crushing helplessness washed over her, a bitter taste, sharp as bile, rising in her throat. He was broken, perhaps beyond repair, a ship foundering on a shore of despair. The system had won its terrible victory, turning a child into this spectral man, a wraith haunted by his own past. The banality of existence. She wanted to gather him, to rewind time, to shield him from the monstrous unfolding of his life. But he was a man now, hardened by the elements, by the indifference of the world, a stranger in a familiar shell. The innocence, once shattered, forever sought, like a lost jewel in a dark, bottomless well. The thrill of the catch, it was not; this was the brutal truth of the prey, cornered and exhausted.
"Luc," she said, her voice catching, raw, a sound that tore at her own throat. "I'm looking for the hospital's hard drives. The records. The proof." The beam of her flashlight swept over the water-damaged cabinets, a frantic searchlight for justice.

He looked at her, truly looked at her, his gaze clearing for a moment, like a window suddenly wiped clean. A spark. "Proof?"

"Yes. Of what they did. What they did to you. Leverage Empathy for Patient-Centered Leadership." Her heart ached, a physical pain, a wound reopened and festering. Your heart is your superpower. She realized this wasn't about titles or protocols anymore. It was about the fundamental human cost, the currency of shattered lives.

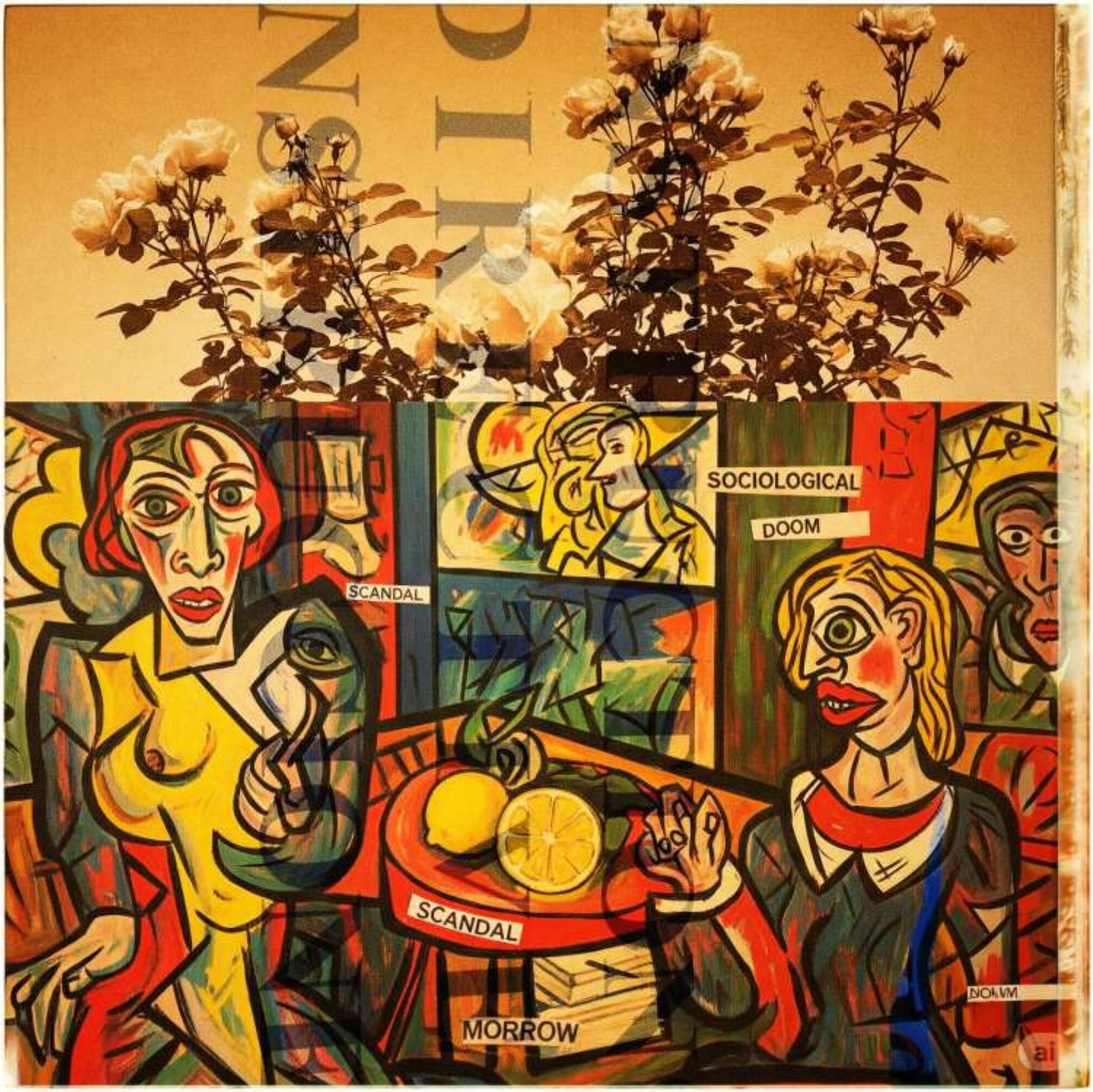
He pointed to a grimy, overturned cabinet, its drawers spilling their ruined contents like entrails. "They moved some of it. To the old asylum in Arcadia. Said it was... incinerated. But some of us... we think not. There's a story, a whispered thing, of a hidden basement."

ALIEN LOVE CHILD FOUND IN SUPERMARKET! she almost heard, the absurd headline a stark, jarring counterpoint to the grim reality before her, an unbearable collision of worlds.

A new lead. A fragile thread in the tapestry of their shared trauma. A profound weariness, yet a flicker of purpose, like a match struck in the dark, a brief, desperate illumination. He was a shadow of the boy she knew, a testament to enduring struggle, but alive. And he remembered.

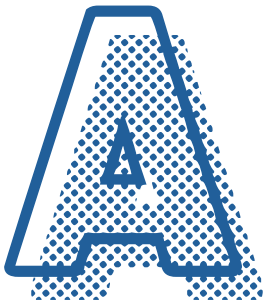
"Luc," she began, the unspoken question hanging between them like the humid air, heavy with unspoken weight. Could they fight this, together?

He turned back to the ruined papers, his gaze distant, pulled by forces she couldn't reach, forces that had claimed too much of him already. "They broke so much, Nurse. But some things... some things refuse to break. Like the truth." A rusted fishing lure lay near his foot, a forgotten piece of metal, a tiny, glittering relic of a life that might have been.


SCANDAL
SOCIOLOGICAL
DOOM
SCANDAL
MORROW

The Lemonade Cantos: Liminal Spectators & the Alchemy of Decay

By Hemlock Shoemaker



h, the air in Mrs. Elmwood's parlour! It fairly vibrated with an exquisitely refined disquiet, as though the very custodians of recorded history, those tiresome pedants, had momentarily—and rather rudely, one might add—relaxed their grip, leaving us to hover just beyond the veil of mundane sight. And the lemonade, my dear reader, not the insipid modern concoction that merely feigns refreshment, but a veritable ambrosia, a heady elixir distilled from the sun-drenched lemons of Mamluk Egypt, ancient dates, and honey that dripped like liquid gold from the very combs of antiquity. The very word, *qatarmizat*, whispered through the annals of time, a delicious secret handshake between centuries, effortlessly linking a lost royal court to this most perfectly Victorian of drawing rooms. A sudden, quite delicious tremor of scandal pulsed, I assure

you, through the very fabric of the settee itself, hinting at indiscretions far more interesting than mere spilled tea.

On the wireless, a scholarly voice rattled the post-structuralist canon with clinical detachment, intoning that "Semiotics, inherently biased, fractures meaning beneath layers of signifiers." A sudden crackle—KRAK!—snapped the fragile spell, rather like an uninvited guest interrupting a perfectly witty epigram. Mrs. Elmwood, an artist of quiet dignity and, one surmises, even quieter passions, dipped her brush into cadmium yellow that seemed to pulse with an unnatural, almost scandalous, life, painting a lemon tree whose fruit glowed grotesquely luminous, as if swollen with too many forgotten memories. One wondered, quite naturally, if a heart, once broken, could ever truly mend. Such a quaint notion, is it not?

Outside, a most curious throng had gathered beneath the storm-gray sky, seated on weathered park benches and shifting uneasily, as if awaiting a particularly dramatic denouement. Through the uncertain windows, a mishmash crowd peered inside with opera glasses—an absurd assembly of dumpy figures in faded beachwear, their sunburnt faces earnest and unremarkable. Among them, a man gripped a melon in one hand, his knuckles white, as if poised to hurl it overhand into the dissolving room, though whether in protest or confusion, none could truly say. The intricate network of social stratification was visibly disrupted by the sheer incongruity of the footwear alone. One simply doesn't wear flip-flops to a structural collapse, does one?

Scattered among this motley audience were figures both familiar and strikingly out of place, rather like jewels carelessly strewn upon a dusty mantelpiece. Virginia Woolf, adjusting her spectacles, murmured about moments of being and the fluidity of consciousness, no doubt finding ample material for her next masterpiece on the inherent chaos of domestic life. Nearby, Sigmund Freud stroked his beard, observing the scene

with an almost clinical fascination, perhaps noting the collective unconscious at play in the crowd's uneasy shuffling. Marcel Duchamp seemed to be taking mental notes, a glint of Dadaist mischief in his eye, perhaps considering the melting parlour as a grand ready-made, an audacious piece of accidental art. Across from him, Susan Sontag, with her characteristic intensity, jotted observations in a small notebook, likely formulating a new theory on the aesthetics of catastrophe, for indeed, what is more aesthetically pleasing than utter disarray? A short distance away, Samuel Beckett watched with a profound, almost weary stillness, the scene perhaps confirming his bleakest comedic suspicions, and one could almost hear his silent sigh of resignation. Even Evel Knievel, resplendent in a faded, star-spangled jumpsuit, squinted through binoculars, muttering about the optimal trajectory for leaping over such a peculiar domestic collapse. These watchers, strangers and familiar minds alike, formed a silent chorus, their presence a spectral commentary on the unfolding spectacle. He'd seen worse crashes, but none quite so... interior.

Beneath their feet, the house groaned—a Victorian titan with a cracking spine, rather like a dowager duchess who has indulged in far too much scandal. The walls whispered of Mr. Samuel Pepys, who, centuries ago, had sipped this very lemonade, blissfully unaware that shadows of his own fate would seep into the fabric of this room, mingling with turpentine and decay. The curtains fluttered, lace dissolving into something sickly sweet, a scent that clung to the air like a slow poison. A damsel's heart, though pure, could not withstand such a dire presentiment of doom, could it?

“Villainy, once unleashed, knows no bounds!” barked the wireless, shattering the genteel veneer, much like a poorly aimed epigram. But Mrs. Elmwood, detached yet unblinking, continued with her artistic endeavors. The roof above her seemed to yawn wide, a gaping maw swallowing the sky itself, as if the house were a creature unspooling its last breath in a most dramatic fashion. Somewhere, unbidden, facts collided: the cephalopod’s nervous system, complex and alien, pulsed like a heartbeat in the chaos. Sometimes, one simply had to gather what strength remained and face the morrow.

The news ticker spiraled into absurdity: *Narcissist arsonist Pharmacist runs for mayor on Candy Mountain. Alien love child discovered in supermarket.* The drawing room dissolved—walls vanished like smoke, windows blinked out, and the floor turned to water, a most unseemly transformation. Portraits floated, some drowning in the ether, but the artist's hand, bless her steadfast dedication, did not falter. She painted the collapse, the chaos, the bittersweet disintegration of a world unmoored. The socio-economic implications of spontaneous architectural dissolution warrant further qualitative analysis, naturally.

A hurricane—unseen but palpable—ripped through the scene, an *Arbitrary Cut* slicing through reality's fragile weave, like a clumsy hand tearing a priceless lace curtain. Yet the canvas remained, stubborn and defiant, secured to its easel as if it too refused to yield to the general decay. Mrs. Elmwood, now a figure caught between dream and waking nightmare, took her brush *en plein air*, capturing the skeletal ruins of home and memory alike. The dark, brooding menace of the encroaching entropy promised a thrilling, if ill-fated, confrontation, much like a duel in a dimly lit drawing room.

Above stretched an indifferent blue sky, vast and unyielding, offering little solace to the distressed observer. She painted the empty spaces where walls had been, the ghostly furniture half-submerged in recollection, the mingled scents of lemon and rot—an elegy for entropy, if ever there was one. Her fingers trembled not, but traced the fractured outlines of an existence endlessly breaking and reforming, a liminal odyssey where the cut-up truth, my dear reader, is the only constant. One does wonder, does one not, if such a spectacle might inspire a new fashion trend in architectural ruin?

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